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VOLUME XI JULY 15th, 1935 NUMBER 3

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LUNGER COURAGE

THE frontiers of the old West were cruel and wanton and stern in their exactions. But by the same token, they returned a brave largesse to those strong enough to claim it. Consider the case of the pale, blue-eyed, skinny little lunger whom men knew as Doc.

Doc came out to Old Fort Stockton, in the Big Bend of Texas. He had a wracking cough, a smooth Southern drawl and a will to survive. From the first, he was a curiosity. He was one of the few men in that part of Texas—and certainly the only gambler—who didn't wear a gun. Folks opined that he lacked the courage to back his judgments with pistol or fists. And, from the way he swallowed insults with poker-face calm, it seemed that they were right. Doc just didn't belong.

If Doc lacked courage in those earlier days, he must surely have drawn it from the bounty of the frontier. For the time was to come when to have questioned his courage was to question fate itself.

One night, in the crowded Alamo Bar, he was dealing faro—and winning heavily. He was playing against Monte Marcus, house gambler from the Lone Star Bar, who had boasted that he would clean out the little lunger tinhorn.

The turn of a card cost Monte Marcus a hundred dollars, and Monte was a bad loser. The enraged house gambler bounced up. "Yore outfit's crooked as a dog's hind leg!" he bawled. "I'm teachin' you a lesson!"

He caught Doc by the scruff of his coat, yanked him across the table. In attempting to shield himself, the little lunger stuck his hand in the bully's face. It drove Monte berserk. He snaked out a .45, commenced pistol whipping Doc cruelly. No man offered to interfere. The crowd cleared a lane as the two men crashed to the floor. Blood trickling from a lacerated scalp, the weakling Doc became like a bayed coyote. Somehow he wrested the gun from Monte's hand, broke free, stood trembling as he eyed the man over the sights.

But Monte was far beyond the point of reason. Bawling oaths, he reached for another gun inside his coat. Then, as coldly as if drawing a card, Doc fired. Monte Marcus lay dead at his feet. Doc looked about, weak, trembly, shaken. But he had suddenly discovered the equalizer that makes small men big; weak men strong.

The knowledge gave a lift to his slender shoulders, a livelier sparkle to his eyes. From there out he seemed to walk with a bit of a swagger—a prideful advertisement that he was heeled with equality and willing to wear no man's collar. Men treated him with new respect.

His new-found poise was not to shield him from trouble. But, as trouble arose, Doc met it with an ever improving draw, with the icy courage of a long dormant heritage and . . .death. He came to be known as one of the West's most dangerous characters. Until, at last, he came to roaring Dodge City and threw his gun in on the side of the law. With the speed of his gun-hand, he saved the life of a courageous young marshal who was to write history along the Westering frontier. Their friendship was to last till death parted it. Side by side, they emblazoned their names on the great roll of those who tamed the lawless West.

The marshal was Wyatt Earp. The little lunger was Doc Holliday, scion of a fine Southern family, who found strength to supplement his weakness in the pistol whipping of a frontier bully.

—TRAIL RIDER

A RENEGADE RIDES

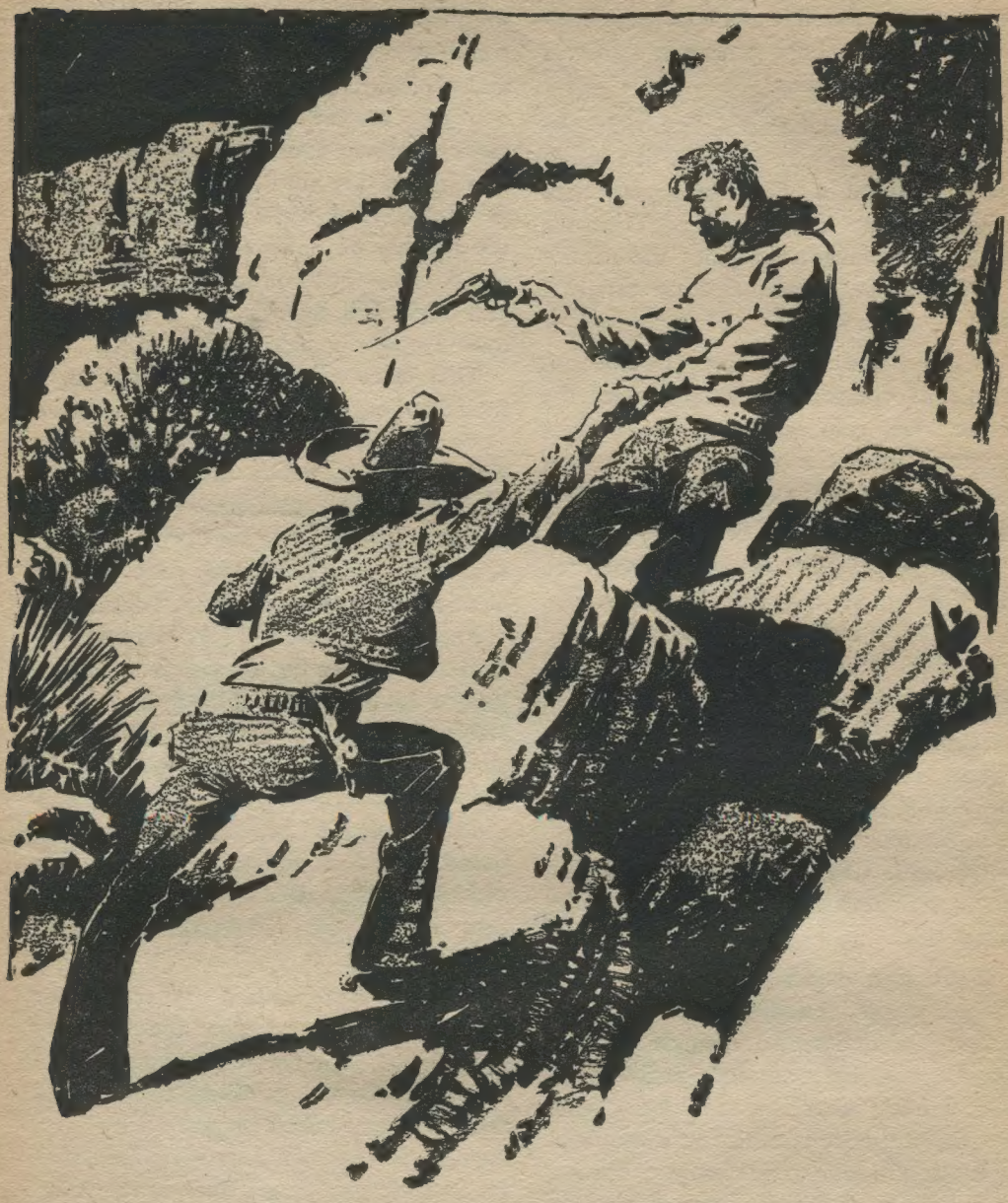
by HARRY F. OLMSTED

(Author of "Gun-Hands for Don Mike," etc.)

When the only two men in the world who trusted Curly Whitson unjustly branded him renegade and thief, he found himself caught between the guns of the wild bunch he had long ago denied and the mistaken hatred of honest men—an outcast, faced with the impossible task of fighting through hell-fire and heartbreak to an honorable future as the rancher husband of the girl he loved!

WITH THE LAW!

A Novel of Border Gunmen



IT LOOKED as if the cards of life were stacked against Curly Whitson, youngest and last of the fighting Whitsons. Maybe it was because he had inherited the salty blood of his sire, old Wolf Whitson, who had ever chafed at the restrictions of what he called his liberties, and had raised his four boys in the saddle with a wide loop in one hand and a careless gun in the other.

According to some wise man, as a feller sews, so also shall he reap. It had been that way with the Whitsons. They'd sowed a lot of hot lead, then reaped some. And when, after losing two sons in gun-ruckuses, old Wolf and his oldest boy

were downed in a Tombstone saloon brawl, Curly was left alone on their Flying W—a little hope-gone cow outfit in the Burro Mountains.

"Too damn bad that Curly wolf-pup couldn't uh been here an' made it a wipe-out," growled a Charleston cowman, watching them carry the dead Whitsons to the undertaker's. "Sooner the name's a memory the better off these ranges'll be."

A lance-like man, long of hair and serene of visage stepped up to face the talker. His cold blue eyes and curling longhorn mustache were already known beyond Cochise County—Wyatt Earp, the mighty marshal of the Chisholm Trail!

"You're hardly fair to the boy, are you?" he quietly asked the lippy cowman. "A dog and a wolf look and act alike from a distance. Why not give the kid a chance before you condemn him."

"Chance, hell!" rasped the cowman. "Shore a dog an' a wolf act alike . . . till the's blood on the moon. Then he slinks along the blood trail an' jerks down somebody's beef. Chance hell, says I! Rub 'im out an' nail his hide to the door as warnin' to his kind."

Wyatt Earp dusted the ash off his cigar. "Which words," he said softly, "drop you down to the level of the renegade Apaches. The Whitson kid's all alone in the world now, fighting what you and I must fight, plus the prejudice you stir in the minds of men. You're taking the best way I know to make him go bronc. Lay off him and give him a fighting chance to make good."

Whereupon Wyatt Earp turned upon his heel and stalked from the saloon, a dignified figure and one of the greatest lawmen ever to wear the star on a frontier noted for iron-gutted peace officers.

In its own small way, that speech of Earp's was due to write history in wild and woolly Cochise County. First, it prejudiced him in favor of Curly Whitson. Then too, it reached Curly's ears, and planted in his embittered young heart a mighty respect for the lion of Tombstone; a respect akin to hero worship. And that in the very face of the already well-developed feud between the Earps and the rustlers of Soldier Holes and Roofless Adobe—the Clantons, the McLowerys and Curly Bill Brocius, all of whom had looked upon the Whitsons as allies.

That hero-worship of Curly's, more than anything else, drew the kid to Tombstone. A slender stripling with wide shoulders, flat, slabby muscles of great strength and the same gun-savvy that had characterized his dad and brothers. An upstanding youngster with a face like a blessing, and a temper like a volcano.

Fate decreed that Wyatt Earp should be the first to see the kid ride in. And unknown to Curly, he studied him as he stabled his pony in the O. K. Corral and strolled along Allen Street to turn into the Oriental Bar, owned jointly by the Earps and their friends. And there Wyatt Earp found him standing at the bar, toying with a drink he didn't want, his curious eyes roving the thronged, brilliantly-lighted bar room.

The place was crowded with rough men from the mines and from the far-flung ranges, and with well-dressed men from the East. Ornate gamblers droned over their well-patronized games. Vivacious, scantily-clad women seemed a little pitiful in their gay tinsel, their brave paint, their frozen smiles. There was the buzz of talk, laughter, the clink of glasses and click of chips, and the endless syncopation of the busy ivory-pounder at the corner piano.

It gripped Curly Whitson, even as it had gripped his dad and brothers before him, but no reflection of that pleasure showed on his face. Only a quiet, almost

sullen seriousness, inspired by knowledge that the hands of all decent men were against him, that the only trail open to him was that one that led toward a hangman's knot or a gunshot grave.

A FLUSH darkened his clean-cut face; a glint sharpened his eye. His wide, cream-colored Stetson tilted back at a rakish angle. The thumb of his right hand was, by habit, hooked in his gunbelt from which depended the notch-handled Colt that had been his father's. Not that those were his notches. They weren't, but that made him no whit less dangerous. For he could do things with that gun, unbelievable acts of magic that had marked him with the rough characters who frequented the Flying W of nights.

That genius accounted now for the kid's wariness. There were hired gunfighters of big cattle spreads who might have orders to wipe out this last whelp of the hated old nester wolf. Then too, there were the two gamblers who had slain Wolf Whitson and his eldest. Should they be out of jail and fearful of vengeance. . . .

Wyatt Earp, having moved to a place beside the boy, spoke softly. "How long will it take to do what you came to do, kid?"

The words cut through Curly like a knife, jarring him out of his detached pleasure with cruel suddenness. With the feeling that no one in Tombstone had business with him save those whom he despised, or those who might have gun-talk to make, Curly went hot, then cold. His hand flashed to his holster as he whirled.

Faster than Wyatt Earp, old Wolf Whitson had once said of Curly. And the kid proved it now, drawing the notched gun and whipping it hard into the marshal's middle, with a swift, flashing movement observed by no one in the room, not even Earp. And now he smiled crookedly, his unwinking stare hard and slitted. Fearlessness personified.

Wyatt Earp laughed softly. "My mistake, son," he chuckled. "I reckon it's none of my business how long your business takes. That cold muzzle's damn uncomfortable in my belly. How about it?"

"Who are you?" snapped the puzzled kid.

Earp smiled wanly. "Some maintain I'm a good outlaw, hiding my light behind the badge of a U. S. marshal. Others that I'm a human devil with horns and tail. But my friends call me Wyatt Earp!"

"Why . . . Earp?" stammered Curly, holstering his gun with furtive embarrassment. "Good Lord, Marshal, what a knothead I made uh myself. I'm sorry. . . . What the hell kin I say. . . .?"

Wyatt Earp laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder. "Don't say it, youngster. Just say that you're hungry and that you'll have supper with me."

"Shore I will," blurted Curly, uncomfortably. "Only I'm so damned ashamed now."

"Forget it. Finish your drink, and we'll eat."

Thus it happened that Curly Whitson, his sullenness giving way to shy wonder, was walking shoulder to shoulder through darkening Tombstone with one who was writing deathless history. Flushed at the sidelong glances of the townsmen, some admiring, some fiercely hate filled, Curly swaggered a little. And he thrilled at the handclasps of a chosen few who were even now defying the laws of chance and the backwash of death's mad dance. Men who were fetching law into the mesquite.

There was cadaverous Doc Holliday, laughingly betting a bullet would get him before the dread ravages of consumption. And moody, hard-eyed Virgil Earp, fighting from necessity rather than from choice. Laughing Morg Earp, on whose

shoulder the Angel of Death was already perched. Billy Breakenridge, no older than Curly yet already building a reputation as a fearless town marshal. Half-pint John Slaughter, frozen-faced and dangerous, who but awaited fate's call to finish the stern job the Earps had started. And others. . . .

Down flamboyant Allen Street, gay white way of this Paris of Western America, they walked in the twilight. First lights had just been lit and the town was commencing to spin in its mad nocturnal whirl. Hurdy-gurdies chimed raucously from smaller and less savory resorts. Larger places commenced to exude their convivial clamor.

Falling into step beside Curly and Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday flapped along in his ill-fitting frock coat, with his queer, loose-kneed gait, looking like some great, underfed buzzard. But there was nothing buzzard-like in his harsh laughter and prankish clowning as he led them into the ornate Maison Doree—finest eating place in all the West.

DOC HOLLIDAY led them to a booth and Curly's eye bugged as the thin fighting man unbuttoned his long coat, unstrapped an ugly, shoulder-slung scattergun and hung it on a hat hook. His nickel-plated Colt's he laid upon the table. "Set, Curly," he grinned, "an' when I git unharnessed here I'll set with yuh. This is Tombstone's pride. Run by the one an' only Julius Caesar, an' boastin' the finest grub this side of Delmonico's in New York. Don't let nothin' spoil yore pleasure. For here yo're rubbin' shoulders with the best people!"

"Best people," snorted Wyatt Earp, casting his cold eyes about the vast room where silk and broadcloth mingled with leather and denim. "If some of yonder herd are our best people, I've sure called the wrong turn on certain grunters I've seen lined up at a sty trough. What you going to eat, Curly?"

But Curly couldn't say. He couldn't read the bill-of-fare that was filled with strange foreign words. He shook his head mournfully. "I reckon I'm 'way off my range, gents," he murmured. "Mebby I better hightail along to some smaller place."

"Don't let it booger you down, cowboy," smiled the marshal. "How about a thick *mignon?* A nice rare filet. . . .?"

"Filly?" Curly started, flushed. "Gosh no. . . Don't! I make a big enough fool uh myself natural an' ordinary. But if I tried tuh show off before some lady. . . ."

He halted, drowned out in the hilarious laughter of his hosts. And Wyatt Earp still shook with mirth as he gave a fat waiter the orders. Before long they were attacking fine steaks and trimmings, the like of which Curly had never before imagined. And now, lingering full fed and content over cigarettes and coffee, Wyatt Earp eyed the kid soberly.

"That was tough, son," he said. "Losin' yore dad an' brother to those two no-account tinhorns."

Curly shrugged. "It was up to someone," he said unfeelingly. "Fellers who ask fer their ticket long enough an' hard enough usually git accommodated. . . ."

The marshal's eyes flickered. "Then you ain't gunnin' for those two?"

"Do I look like I'm honin' tuh jerk down a jailhouse?"

"Not at all," grimaced Wyatt Earp. "But that wouldn't be necessary. The two killers were out in a matter of hours. Likely never will come to trial. They are friends of Sheriff Behan's crowd and fifty men will testify they fired in self-defense. I'm mighty glad you're holding no ideas of revenge. What are you aiming to do with yourself?"

Curly blew on the coal of his cigarette.

His eyes were suddenly hard. "What can I do?" he demanded bitterly. "Decent folks want no part of me an' I want no part of the other kind. The only thing held out to me is the gun trail. No man on earth respects me."

"Don't say that, son," responded the marshal, deeply moved, "or you'll get to believing it. Respect isn't what others think of you. It's what you think of yourself. Self-respect tells you the proper way to walk. And the way you walk, in turn, molds the opinions of your fellow men. So, after all, it's up to you. You're in no soft spot, son, but the tougher the odds, the sweeter the victory. As I look at you, guns will be your toughest obstacle. And guns are bad medicine. Am I right, Doc?"

Doc Holliday, suddenly stiff, was staring out across the floor, a strange smile on his bony face, a warrior glint in his sunken eyes. His long, slender fingers were curling around the grip of his Colt as he watched the entry of five rough-clothed, swaggering men with sagging holsters and singing spurs. They were men with gun-reps destined to go ringing down the years in song and story; those outlaws who had spent many a rollicking night on Old Wolf Whitson's Flying W Ranch! Curly Bill Brocius, John Ringo, Old Man Clanton, Frank McLowery and Frank Stillwell—all due to die within the year, two at the hands of Wyatt Earp; one each at the hands of Curly Whitson and Doc Holliday.

The droll doctor's answer to the marshal's query was softly detached, mechanical. "Right as rain, my old friend. Right as rain. Guns is shore bad medicine . . . an' never worse than fer our five long-nosed friends yonder."

Among the outlaws was a lifting of brows as they glimpsed Curly Whitson with their two most deadly enemies. An ugly laugh trickled from their midst, filtering through the buzz of the patrons. To the three in the booth came the tag end of sneering opprobrium as they walked past: ". . . . the kid. He's gone yella!"

And Curly knew that if his personal problem had been tough before, it was now edged with the threat of ruthless and desperate men.

CHAPTER TWO

Helldorado

AS if he felt some measure of responsibility for the added threat to Curly Whitson's security, Wyatt Earp set out to make the kid's evening an unforgettable one. They visited the variety show at the Bird Cage Theatre, later they dropped into the Oriental for a glimpse of sky-limit gambling and a few drinks of rare and delicious liqueurs. Then, sometime after midnight, they stood outside the busy barroom. Curly tried to express his appreciation as he announced his intention to return to the Flying W; but Wyatt Earp counselled him as to his future.

"You can best thank me, son," smiled the lawman, "by makin' something of yourself. Listen! There's a cowman in town tonight that's a friend of mine—old Clawhammer Payne who runs the Clawhammer iron down in Muleshoe Valley. A good, square old feller with a heart as big as outdoors. I've had my eyes peeled for him all evening, but he's likely playing poker in some private game. But I'll see him and give him a talk. You ride over there, say day after tomorrow, and have a talk with him. Sign up to ride for him. Give him the best that's in you and let the future take care of itself. And, while I recall it," he jabbed his thumb in Curly's brisket playfully, "don't neglect yore work for that cute little filly of Clawhammer's. She's also bad medicine. Well,

so long, Curly. And be sure to look me up whenever you're in this helldorado."

With a promise, Curly left him, heading for the O. K. Corral. Wyatt Earp watched him a moment, then turned into the Oriental. At the first cross street, two shadowy figures stepped out to intercept Curly. One was Old Man Clanton, the other Frank McLowery.

"H'are yuh, kid," greeted Clanton, with a snaggle-tooth grin. "Bin steppin' out amongst 'em, eh?"

"Some," answered the last of the Whitsons with distaste. "Why?"

"What the hell you throwin' in with them damn Earps fer?" rasped McLowery. "Damn if that ain't a slap in the face to all the boys that was friends to yore father an' brothers. Git wise to yoreself, feller."

"I reckon that's what's happened," answered Curly stiffly. "I never did like you boys or the game yuh play. An' I ain't liable tuh like it any better. I ain't throwed in with the Earps nor any other man . . . yet. But when I do pick my saddle pards I figger tuh do it of my own free will, an' tuh hell with them that don't like it! Is that plain enough?"

Rage suffused the eyes of Frank McLowery, a killer of parts in his own right. He seemed to settle as his elbows angled and his right hand drove to his holster. "Damn you, yuh double crossin' snake, I'll—"

He didn't finish. For, without visible effort, Curly's gun-hand had flashed and was holding Wolf Whitson's old Colt unwaveringly on the two before him.

"What is it yo're goin' tuh do, Frank?" he hummed. "Talk right up in meetin' an' don't be bashful."

McLowery relaxed. Old Man Clanton coughed nervously. "Don't pay no attention to Frank, kid. He's drunk. Frank, go on an' join the boys. I'll say a few words to Curly here an' be along directly. Git!"

Cursing under his breath, Frank McLowery shuffled away into the gloom, Curly watching his every move. As he slid his gun home, his eyes were on the head of the Clanton clan. "Well," he snarled. "Say yore piece. I'm not stayin' here all night. Le's have it."

"Lissen, Curly," the old man wheedled. "I knowed yore paw well, knowed him fer years. Yeah, an' respected him. An' yore brothers too. I knowed you when you was jest a button. That's why I wanta save you all the grief I kin, keep you from makin' a damn fool uh yourself. Them fellers you was with tonight is marked fer boothill—all the Earps an' all their damn bootlickers, startin' with Wyatt Earp an' ol' Doc Holliday. Now what good fer you would it be tuh tie up with men as good as dead? Huh? Use yore head, younker. I kin use you an' that gunswift uh yores. I'll put yuh in the way of fast times an' big money. Bigger money than you ever dreamed of, kid. . . ."

"I know that kind uh money, Clanton," answered the kid. "I seen it ruin my dad an' my brothers before me. Tuh hell with it. I'm goin' straight an' no man better try to stop me. Don't forget what I tell yuh. An' tell that four-flushin' McLowery outfit that if one of 'em ever makes a play to draw on me again, I'll make him fit for flies."

Stiffly, he stepped around the gaping old outlaw and strode upon his way, daring them to drop him from some dark covert.

AND so he came to the narrow rear entrance to the O. K. Corral. He turned into the gloomy, canopied arcade, where horses stamped and snorted. Walking directly to his pony, he reached down to tighten the cinch. It was hanging loose, cut clean across with a keen blade. As

Curly bent over, examining this act of vandalism, the hard muzzle of a short gun jabbed into his kidney. A swift hand snatched his weapon.

"Stand up, smart alick!" It was Frank McLowery, drunk and ugly. "Brave talk you make yonderly, feller, but it takes money tuh buy likker. You think you kin go over to the Earps, eh? Not alive you can't. You know too damn much about the Soldier Holes boys an' the riders uh Roofless Adobe. You make up yore mind now. Right now, sabby? Are you ridin' with us or with the Earps?"

Curly straightened, his eyes lancing the gloom. Behind McLowery he could see the blacker forms of his companions—Curly Bill, deadly-tempered John Ringo and others. The kid knew these men perhaps better than anyone outside their own rider organizations; he knew now that his life hung upon the answer. For just a moment he hesitated, weighing his chances, bracing himself for the shock of a life-searing slug. Knowing he could never crawl to these rustlers but in some doubt as to how to answer, he searched for just what to say that would give him the best chance against their savagery.

"Talk fast!" snapped McLowery. "Say yo're ridin' with Earp, an' we'll give yuh to 'im. . . . Dead!"

Then fate answered for him. A quick bootstep from the gloom. Two darting figures black against the starlight. There was an instantaneous glint of steel as an arm rose and fell; the crunch of a gun-barrel on bone. The damning pressure at Curly's kidney relieved as Frank McLowery groaned and fell.

"Buffaloed 'im!" came Wyatt Earp's satisfied grunt.

"Sky yore dewclaws, gunies!" rapped Doc Holliday, laughingly. "I've got eyes like a cat an' eighteen buckshot waitin' for the boy that feels gun-handy. I kin drop yuh all an' not a jury in Arizona will convict me. Get 'em up now. . . High!"

As they elevated, the hostler came running from his cubby office, his lantern flashing. "What's up?" he cried, half fearfully. "Who is it?"

"Wyatt Earp," called the marshal, "rootin' out a few skunks." And then to Curly Whitson: "what they doin' to you, kid?"

"Cuttin' a new cinch mostly," explained the youngster. "An' settin' me all but afoot."

"Did, eh?" the lawman chuckled. "Hostler, go to Frank McLowery's saddle and fetch me his cinch. And don't waste time."

The man obeyed with alacrity, and in a matter of minutes, Curly had exchanged it for his own ruined rigging and was ready to ride.

"Come on!" the marshal ordered him. "I've got a man I want you should meet." He turned to the bunched, sullen rustlers. "You boys made a play and lost your taw," he told them, not unpleasantly. "Now get outa town, and when you have war boiling in your neck, come back and see us. I'm not deaf, Brocius, nor you Ringo, nor you Frank Stillwell. I know what you're planning and what you lack the nerve to do. Well, you can have it any time you like. Ease up on 'em, Doc. They're skunks. C'mon, boys."

Unconcernedly he stalked out of the lantern light, followed by Curly Whitson leading his pony, and by Doc Holliday. Out on Allen Street, Wyatt Earp, still stiff with anger, dropped back and fell into step with Curly. "Glad you didn't get away, kid," he said softly. "I've got old Clawhammer waiting up here at the Dragoon House. I've talked to him. He wants to meet you."

So, a few minutes later, Curly Whitson stood before the Clawhammer boss. Payne, a thickly-built, black-eyed man of fifty, sat sprawled in a chair in the lobby,

his face drawn with sleeplessness and the strain of long drinking and card-playing. He didn't offer to rise, simply lifting a weary hand to Curly, and invited him to sit down.

For all that the old cowman was much the worse for his town visit there was something substantial about him. A solid quality that instilled confidence, that drew men to him as the sparks fly upward. His smiling eyes, red-shot from long hours and bad whiskey, fastened on Curly.

"Wyatt's bin tellin' me about you, young feller," he chuckled. "An', if anybody ever asks yuh, tell him Wyatt Earp talks most as potent as he shoots. Yeah. He's convinced me I'll be a heap better off lettin' yuh steal cattle *for* me instead uh *from* me. What do you think?"

Curly bounced out of his chair, his face reddening, his eyes snapping. "I reckon we've talked enough, Mister Payne," he said, heatedly. "I've quit one cow-stealin' outfit, an' ain't lookin' fer another. Thankin' you jest the same. . . .!"

Clawhammer whooped his pleasure. "Ho, ho, ho, ho, haw! That's the best thing I've heard in Tombstone. Set down, yuh young wolf an' I'll tell yuh what I've got planned fer yuh. No answer you coulda made woulda tickled me more. The's too damn many boys on these ranges lookin' fer good rustlin' jobs an' not enough of the other kind. Yo're comin' out to the Clawhammer at forty a month to start. An' . . ."

And that was the start of Curly Whitson's friendship with Clawhammer Payne, a friendship that was to be made and broken and made again. A friendship that raised Curly to ramrod of the huge Clawhammer outfit in his first year, that tore him down from his high place, humiliated him, lit in him again the devil-may-care fires of his wild heritage. Yet that friendship was to reclaim him in the end and set him on the straight highroad to his destiny—one of the most powerful yet beloved cowmen in all of those desert ranges.

CHAPTER THREE

A Deal in Cattle

THE seeds of suspicion are insidious things, flying on the wings of the faintest breezes, filtering down with the rustling leaves to add their whispers to the slithering sands, there to take root and rear their crops of doubt, distrust and disbelief.

It was inevitable that Curly Whitson fall under the cloud of suspicion. Despite the fact that it was the boast of Clawhammer Payne that ". . . he's the best dang cowman ever I seen, an' mebbyso the best that ever was borned." Despite the fact that rotund Mother Payne loved him ". . . as if he was my own." And despite the fact that eighteen-year-old Joanna Payne—Clawhammer's straight-talking, hard riding girl—found a new and romantic interest in this whelp of old Wolf Whitson, and spent long evenings with him in the rambling Payne adobe, schooling him in the three R's and in the vagaries of feminine inconsistency.

Trouble started when Don Esteban came riding to the Clawhammer Ranch.

ESTEBAN BUENRROSTRO MALARKY crossed the International Line and came direct to the Clawhammer Ranch, on business for the huge Rancho Temescal in Sonora. Darkly dashing, he was the son of a Mexican *hidalga,* daughter of the famous house of Buenrrostro and wild-hearted Mike Malarky, Irish captain, who played a bulky part in the revolt of Benito Juarez.

Tall, romantic, clothed in black and silver, Don Esteban made a heroic figure on his prancing Arabian stallion as he

swung through the gates of the Clawhammer, his dark face deep stamped with the heritages of his blood—the bold courage of his sire, the passion, the tragedy of the people of his mother. His high-belted, pearl-gripped gun, gay conchos and silver spurs on fancy-stitched boots, his rich cone-peaked sombrero and trappings, his bold smile and the rakish slant of his black cigarette, all of these pictured a man ruled by those twin gods that have ever dominated man—love and war. Don Esteban—a steel fist in a velvet glove.

Eager to buy a score of blooded shorthorn bulls from the Clawhammer, Don Esteban found his arrival ill-timed. Clawhammer Payne was in bed with the miseries. Curly Whitson was in the Burros with a crew of punchers. It was Joanna, her blue eyes wide with admiration of this gay caballero from nowhere, who met him at the ranch-hourse door.

"Buenas dias, señorita," Don Esteban's hat swept the porch as he bowed. "I am Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky, *mayordomo* of the beeg Rancho Temescal een Sonora. Steve, my *Americano* friends call me—Steve Malarky. The cattle of our rancho are too long of horn and too short on beef. Eet weel be my pleasure to meet the so-estimable Señor Payne and buy from heem one hundred blooded bulls and heifers. . . ."

"Oh," frowned Joanna, "what a shame, Señor Malarky! Daddy is sick in bed. But come right in."

And so, with her clanking guest seated in the long room strewn with bright Indian rugs, Joanna went to her father's bedroom to acquaint him with this business. And the gay Irish-Mexican chuckled humorously as the cowman's words came filtering out to him: "Damn these rheumatics anyway!" complained old Clawhammer. "It'd kill me tuh ride from here to the barn. An' these big Mexicans is good pay. Lissen, send Shorty out tuh fetch in Curly. It'll be up tuh him tuh make the deal an' entertain this Mex till he's satisfied. An', in the meantime, you an' Maw make him comfortable, an'. . . ."

So Joanna and Maw made Don Esteban comfortable, to their great delight. This Steve Malarky was like a breath out of a great unknown. Steve Malarky, with his droll tales of his people, his breath-taking yarns of his father's experiences, his hesitant and quaintly slurred recitals of his fortunes and misfortunes as a son of old John Harvard, back in the East. . . On and on, spinning his inimitable windies, singing his haunting Mexican melodies, charming these two range women with his wit and manner. Until Curly Whitson came roaring down from the hills to terminate the visit.

Curly took Don Esteban out to see the cattle, negotiated the deal, then, acting upon the advice of Old Clawhammer, rode with the visitor for an evening of relaxation in Tombstone. A memorable evening for two men as different in background and manner as night is from day, yet as alike in one quality as twins: man-stuff.

There were drinks in the Oriental, where Curly introduced his guest to Wyatt Earp. Had Curly been older and more discerning, he might have seen the marshal's eyes narrow, his mouth grow a bit more grim as he shook hands with Don Esteban. This stern lion of Tombstone, had grown more austere, more unyielding in the hectic year since Curly had last seen him. The marshal was drawn with another twelve months of constant wariness and warfare as the lines of battle narrowed and the odds pressed down.

In that vagrant shadow that fleetingly darkened the face of Wyatt Earp, was reflection of knowledge that here was one of the most glamorous and dangerous men in all Mexico—an almost mythical

figure who stalked like a tiger among the plain people who loved him. Here was a legendary Robin Hood who stole for the love of conflict and a lust to alleviate the suffering of the unfortunate. A man who could have no business with a kid foreman of an American outfit, except. . . .

EL TIGRE they called him, this gay rider of dim trails—the Tiger! One who had more than once claimed the attention of the U. S. marshal's office, and its representative in wild Cochise County, Wyatt Earp.

While still holding the muscular hand of Don Esteban, the lion of Tombstone bored the man with his eyes. "Glad tuh know any friend of Curly's, señor," he said softly, "and to welcome him to our unbridled town. What are you doing up this way?"

Don Esteban bowed, smiled. "The pleasure ees mutual, Señor Earp. I am but enjoying myself among new-found friends. *Amigos muy preciosos.* Curly, thees so-brave a caballero; Señora Payne who cooks the so-heavenly food; Señorita Joanna—ah, so exquisite a hostess. I am desolated that I cannot een some way repay their hospitality."

"I venture to say," mused Wyatt Earp, cryptically, "you'll find a way to repay that hospitality. A way they may least expect . . . I'll see you boys later."

He turned away in answer to someone's friendly hail. And Curly went to supper with Don Esteban at the colorful Can Can, attended the Bird Cage, had a few more drinks and started for their horses.

Fate decreed that Wyatt Earp should be standing in the shadows at the corner of the Oriental as they passed him. But he hadn't heard Don Esteban's query. "*Amigo mio,*" the Irish-Mexican had asked, "when have I enjoyed an evening so much? And to theenk I must leave these friendships and ride the lonely trail back to Rancho Temescal. One thought sustains me, amigo. The thought of my *dulcita* . . . my little sweet one. Paloma Vives, amigo, daughter of my *patrón* Don Rafael. Pardon, my friend, eef I seem to rave, but I am warm weeth wine and romance. Truly, Curly *mio,* you must come to Rancho Temescal sometime and meet Señorita Paloma, *mi corason.* But enough of thees foolishness. We must now get down to business: I much desire these bulls you promise me, but also I desire not to take advantage of a friendship. . . ."

Then his voice lifted, and the first words of his colloquy came to Wyatt Earp: ". . . . you are sure, *amigo mio,* your *patrón* weel not mees these cattle?"

"Hell no, he won't need 'em," Curly's laugh stung the lawman's ears. "He's got so many cattle, now, he can't tell within' a thousand head of the tally. Take my word for that. No, I want you to have 'em. When do yuh want delivery?"

"Een about a week, amigo," answered Don Esteban, "my segundo weel come for them. You feex heem up. . . ."

And they were out of hearing of the suddenly tense marshal, who didn't get the rest: ". . . . and he weel breeng the money to pay you before accepting the cattle. All right, my friend?"

Thus, from what he had heard, Wyatt Earp must perforce place an erroneous and evil interpretation on the agreement between the two friends. Just another strand in the stout web fate wove about Curly Whitson. A grimace of distaste shadowed Earp's face. He spat, dusted off his hands.

"So that's the way the wind blows!" he murmured bitterly. "Damned if I ever would have believed it of Curly. Like father, like son, as the feller said. I reckon those are true words. There's nary a dog whelp in the wolf litter."

Thus were the seeds of suspicion

planted that were to shatter the dreams of happy Curly Whitson; dreams that were delicious to dream, dreams that were then so very, very near to becoming true happenings.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outlaw Heritage

IT was nearly a week before Wyatt Earp found time to ride to the Clawhammer and closet himself with crochety Clawhammer Payne. Not in the rôle of talebearer, but as one friend who had gotten another into a jam by ill-timed and faulty advice. But several things had happened in that time. Don Esteban had taken leave of his friends and had ridden south across the Line. Some rustler opportunist had struck at the herd of blooded cattle out of which Curly was cutting a hundred young shorthorns for the Rancho Temescal, killing one Clawhammer hand, leaving only a riderless, bloody-saddled horse to account for the second of two punchers who had been holding the herd that night.

The raid had happened during second guard while Curly Whitson and the weary cowboys were in bed at the ranch, five miles away. At third guard, two riders loped out to relieve the dead men. By the time they had returned to the ranch with the grim news and had led the outfit back to the holding ground, dawn was breaking.

What all of them had supposed to be one of the short, sharp thrusts of the Curly Bill outlaws, proved in the light of day to have the earmarks of something else. The trail of the stolen cattle led straight south toward the Border. And along that trail, unknowing that Wyatt Earp was already started for the Clawhammer Ranch, Curly Whitson led his men.

It was mid-afternoon when Wyatt Earp reached the Clawhammer Ranch. He found Old Man Payne fit to tie. "By God, Wyatt!" he swore. "You've gotta do somethin' about Curly Bill, the Clantons an' McLowerys."

The lion of Tombstone stared into the glass of whiskey the cowman poured for him. The dull amber of the liquor seemed to give back a little of the grim temper those names stirred in the man.

"I think you're right, Clawhammer," he said, tonelessly. "I think when all is said an' done, I will have done something with that outfit. What they doin' to you?"

"Robbin' me!" rasped Clawhammer Payne, grinding his cigar between his teeth. "I had Curly gather me about three hundred of the finest shorthorns I've got on the ranch. He was cuttin' out a hundred breeders, twenty bulls an' the rest heifers. Had 'em sold to the Rancho Temescal, down near Batepito in Sonora. Don Rafael Vives—you know the outfit."

"I know," nodded the marshal, sipping at his glass. "Go on."

"Payin' me a hundred dollars a head, he was," went on the irate cowman. "An' his segundo is due here with the money any time now."

"Top price," murmured the lawman, with a wry smile. "You better take it."

"That's just it," wailed Clawhammer. "These three hundred was the pick uh my outfit. Ain't got many uh these blooded cattle—nobody has out this way—an' now them damned Roofless Dobe riders has cleaned out my gather. Three hundred head an' better. Thirty thousand dollars gone tuh line the pockets uh cutthroats."

"What you doin' about it?" asked Wyatt Earp, quietly.

"Doin'? What kin I do? Curly's done took all the boys an' lined out on the trail."

"Expect him tuh ketch' em?" inquired the lawman, with a wan smile.

"Ketch 'em? I don't care if he does or not. Just so he gets within Winchester range of the devils—" And then he broke off, as if he sensed some enormous doubt in his friend's mind. "What yuh mean by that, Wyatt? What's on yore mind?"

The marshal shook himself. "I ain't surprised, Clawhammer, that yore shorthorns are gone. I'm only sorry I couldn't get here in time to have prevented it. You're a good friend uh mine, otherwise I'd keep my mouth shut. In a way, I'm responsible. But for me you never would have hired Curly Whitson."

"What the hell's wrong with Curly?" demanded the cowman. "Best damn cowhand ever I had ridin' for me. Hardest worker. Twenty-one years old, an' roddin' the Clawhammer. An' I mean roddin' it. What you talkin' about, Wyatt?"

"I seldom go wrong on a man, Clawhammer," said the lawman, moodily. "But it looks like I did with Curly."

And then he told Clawhammer of his meeting Curly with the smilingly courteous Don Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky, who by the records was no other than El Tigre, much wanted bandit protected by the adoring peons to whom he had dedicated his life. Wyatt Earp told of the fragmentary conversation he had overheard between the two men, of how it had led him away from the unbounded confidence he had placed in young Curly Whitson.

". . . . that was six days ago, Clawhammer, and I fully intended to ride right out here to warn you, which would no doubt have saved you this loss. But unfortunately I had to make a trip to Tucson and am nearly a week late. I'm twice responsible. I'm sorry."

Clawhammer Payne bounced to his feet, blood pumping dangerously into his already florid face.

"Well, I'll be a coyote's cousin!" he mouthed hoarsely. "The dirty little skunk—the traitorous scalawag! So he done that tuh me? Wyatt, it's hard tuh figger how a feller kin fall as low as that. Why, I fetched him down here an' mostly made him one of the family. Ma done fer him like as if he was her own. Joanna tuck him in here uh nights an' set forth tuh school him. He seemed to appreciate it, but now. . . ."

"Wait a minute!" The famous lawman held up his hand. A grim smile twisting his thin lips. "Mebby we're doin' the kid wrong, Clawhammer."

"Wrong? Why, damn his o'nery hide, how else kin a feller explain what you heard him tellin' that Mex?"

"That's it. Mebby we should give him a chance to explain it. Men have a way of jumpin' at false conclusions, my friend. Look at me an' my brothers up there in Tombstone. Half the citizens up there are convinced that we're rascals who are in league with outlaws, if not outlaws ourselves. Mebby you haven't heard. They accuse us openly of having engineered the Sandy Bob stage robbery and of having Doc Holliday pull it off—a foul lie if ever there was one. But a lie that many good people are constrained to believe. I only heard a snatch of what the boy said to El Tigre. Mebby if I'd heard the rest—"

"Lissen!" Clawhammer Payne stood up, hearkening to a sudden echo of sound from outside.

The door to the kitchen burst open and a plump, flushed-faced woman looked in.

"Excuse me, Paw," she murmured. "The boys are come back. Mebby you better. . . ."

"Good!" snapped Clawhammer. "Step out an' holler fer Curly, Maw. Tell that yellow-belly tuh come in here an' git his come-uppance, the snake!"

"Why, Paw! However can you talk thataway about Curly?"

"Call him!" ordered the cowman.

"Don't stand there gabbin' about a worthless whelp of a wolf outfit. Send him in here!"

Maw Payne closed the door, murmuring, "Land sakes, I think it's dreadful the way you men talk about one another." And then her voice was echoing in a call for the young ramrod.

CURLY WHITSON came in with a weary droop to his shoulders. With less than three hours' sleep, after a hard day with the herd, he had pounded along the rustler trail and back, twelve hours in the saddle. But it was more than physical weariness that bogged him down now. At sight of Wyatt Earp, he bounded forward, thrust out his hand to grip that of the great lawman.

"H'are yuh, Mister Earp," he grinned, his voice hoarse from the ravages of alkali dust. "Glad tuh see yuh. Wisht I'd had you along with me today, fer yore advice."

"I'm sorry I wasn't here, Curly," answered the marshal, evenly. "But whether my advice would have—"

"It wasn't advice you needed, feller," rasped Clawhammer, "as much a good straight shootin'."

There was animosity in his tone, and the trail-weary kid whirled to him. "Straight shootin'?" he echoed, his brows furrowing. "What yuh mean, Clawhammer?"

"Where's them cattle?" evaded the cowman.

Curly drew himself up. "The trail led straight to the Border!" he announced despondently, "an' into Mexico. I was tempted tuh go after 'em, but . . . but . . ." He clipped off, puzzled and a little angry at the swift glance that passed between Clawhammer and Wyatt Earp.

Then the cowman was snarling at him. "But you was a-scairt you might have to do some shootin', eh?" sneered Clawhammer. "Scairt yuh might have tuh fog up yore pardner in crime."

Curly started. "What yuh mean by that?" he asked softly. . . . Too softly.

Wyatt Earp got up, laid a large hand on the quivering boy's shoulder. "Steddy, son," he murmured. "Clawhammer's mad, an' who are we tuh blame him for losin' thirty thousand dollars. You say you followed the trail to the Border, then turned back. You did right. None of us have any business crossing that Line without the formality of papers. But I'm wonderin' if you have any idea as tuh who run them cattle off?"

"Yes!" answered Curly, stiffly. "I have. It's my guess it's Curly Bill, Ringo, the Clantons an' McLowerys."

"They market their beef in Tombstone," the marshal reminded him.

"This wasn't beef," countered the youngster. "It was three hundred head uh pureblood shorthorns. With plenty markets layin' down there where they'll pay cash for that kinda stuff. Don't yuh think Curly Bill knows what that stuff's worth?"

"Do you think," retorted Wyatt Earp, gently, "that Curly Bill and his men dare go to the Mexican *hacendados* to deal? After massacring that Mex trader wagon train in Skeleton Canyon? No. I think the herd was taken by your gay and personable friend—Don Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky—known as Steve Malarky. . . ."

"Don Esteban!" Curly Whitson's eyes were incredulous. "Why he's the one that's *buyin'* the cattle."

"You mean that he's the one who had you gather the cattle for which he had a ready market. Very convenient for him, seeing that he put up not one cent of payment. You know who that smart hombre is, Curly?"

"Mayordomo of the Rancho Temescal," he said.

"Bosh and tosh! He's the one known

as El Tigre—the Tiger. The fellow who snaps his fingers at Mexican law. I knew him the minute you presented him to me that night in the Oriental. I had reason to believe at that time that you were in ignorance as to his real business. Later, from little things you and he dropped, I had reason to change my mind. You did know his real business, didn't you?"

"No!" snapped Curly. "I knowed nothin' more'n what he told me . . . . an' Clawhammer too."

"An' you did make a deal with him to raid these cattle you were to gather; is that not a fact?"

"It's a lie!" charged Curly, his voice tragically level and enormously hostile.

Clawhammer Payne bounced to his feet. "It may be a lie, you young scapegrace!" he bawled irately, "But tuh me, Wyatt Earp's lies is gospel fallin' on the barren ground uh other men's truths. Wyatt heard yuh make that crooked deal with Malarky. Heard yuh conspire tuh ruin me. Fine payment that fer the treatment you've got here. Well, yo're fired. Which you'll laugh at, I reckon. Men don't do what you done unless there's more'n wages in it." From his pocket he drew a roll of bills, peeled off what Curly had coming.

Curly took the money unknowingly. His brain was reeling under the shock of this unthinkable catastrophe. A thousand crazy notions surged and battled in his brain. His pride bade him hurl the charge back into their teeth, to curse them for their brainless reasoning. His selfishness dictated soft words, a quiet questing for the truth in order that he need not sacrifice the first pleasurable home he had ever known—and Joanna. Sweet, domestic little Joanna who had grown into his heart like some insidious disease.

Vaguely he was aware of Wyatt Earp speaking: "Just a minute, Clawhammer. Don't be hasty. Curly, what I came down here for was to tell Mister Payne what I thought he should know. I heard a fragment of your talk with this El Tigre. Somethin' to do with Clawhammer havin' more cattle than he knew anything about, something about him never missin' a certain gather of 'em that Malarky was worried a little about takin'. . . ."

"Deny it if yuh kin!" snarled Clawhammer.

A QUEER look overspread Curly's face; a look hard to interpret, and one which might easily have been mistaken for guilt. That was but the reflection of the pain the kid was feeling in the loss of a idol. To him, Wyatt Earp had been like a winking beacon to a storm-bound ship on an unfriendly coast. The marshal was the first man to imbue him with a hope of rising above his sordid heritage, with the determination to go straight and thus mold the opinions of his fellow men. And, having planted that ideal in Curly's heart, having watched it sprout and grow, he was now cutting it off at the root. That hurt.

"I don't deny it," he heard himself murmur, and then his eyes were locked with the cold gray orbs of the lion of Tombstone. "I see how you figger it, Mister Earp, an' I don't blame yuh. But do you think I'm guilty uh this?"

"In the face uh what's happened, son," said the marshal in a kindly voice, "it looks mighty bad for yuh. Yore past connections damn you in the minds of most men. Yore dad an' brothers were bad, an' . . . ."

"I didn't ask you fer my life history, Mister Earp," broke in Curly. "I asked if you, personal, believed I'm guilty uh this."

Wyatt Earp nodded slowly. "Much as I hate to, Curly, I believe El Tigre put over a fast one on you. The mere fact that you were friendly with him is a basis for suspicion, any time."

"That's all I want to know," answered Curly, sullenly. He walked to the table,

threw down the money Clawhammer had given him and faced the cowman with a queer little smile. "Mister Payne, from the evidence it looks like I owe yuh thirty thousand dollars. If I ever pay it back, I'll have tuh steal it. Whether I do or not depends on gettin' to a point where I can bring myself to steal. Good night to both of yuh."

Stiff of back, his head held high and his legs pumping rhythmically, he went out the door, closing it behind him. For an instant there was silence in the room he had left.

Then Wyatt Earp drew himself sternly erect. His eyes, strangely bleak, sought those of the cowman. "Clawhammer," he said morosely, "I think that somewhere along the line our reasonin' has slipped a cog."

CHAPTER FIVE

Curly Rides Alone

OUTSIDE the door, Curly Whitson wheeled right, went clumping along the vine-shrouded porch with singing rowels. Thus he passed the slender figure standing inanimate in the gloom. His spoken name arrested him: "Curly!"

Curly halted, slowly wheeled. For a long moment he stood there staring into the shadows from whence the voice had come, fighting down an anger, vast and engulfing, that surged through his young veins. He stood there like a gray statue against the black velvet of night, his eyes smouldering coals, but every other lineament of him frozen granite.

She spoke again, and came to him. It was Joanna. That patronizing little daughter of Clawhammer and Maw Payne had ridden with him, deviled him with her biting humor, struggled with him in those long sessions with grammar, with arithmetic and penmanship beside the gaping fireplace in the ranch living room. A refreshing breath from a strange world, she had already burned her image indelibly upon his heart and upon his brain.

He looked down at her now, caught the glint of starlight in her smoky eyes and on her corn-tassel hair. He felt the questioning impact of her glance and the soft pressure of her hands on his arm.

"Curly," she repeated for the third time. "You seem so hard; like a stranger. What has happened? Is it the herd?"

"Yes," he answered tonelessly. "The herd. The cattle are gone?"

"You mustn't mind too much," she counselled sagely. "In the cattle business we've got to expect losses. We do what we can, but cannot change the world. As long as some have much and others have nothing, there will be lawlessness. I feel terrible about those two boys that got killed, but as for the loss . . . . dad will live through it, just as he has lived through it before. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"Yes there is," he disputed her. "I ribbed up the deal with the rustlers. I sold the Clawhammer out. I'm a snaky thief. I'm the no-good whelp of a rustlin' outfit. I'm—"

She checked his flow of bitterness with a gentle hand over his curling lips. "Hush, Curly. What are you saying? You didn't do that; I know you didn't."

"Yes I did," insisted Curly. "Yore father an' Wyatt Earp say so."

"That don't make it so, Curly. They don't know as much about it as I do. And I know you couldn't do a thing like that. Tell me all about it. What are you going to do?"

"I'm ridin' away."

"Where?"

"Oh, I don't know. Soldier Holes; Roofless Adobe; Galeyville—anywhere. What difference does it make now? In a month everyone in Cochise County will know I'm a thief. An' there's more per-

centage in bein' one than just bein' called one."

His bitterness stabbed the girl like a knife. She withdrew her hands as if in sudden revulsion. Those towns he had named were all notorious outlaw hideouts frequented by Curly Bill and his out-trail pirates. That made Curly Whitson's bitter meaning all too clear to Joanna. And it frightened her.

"Curly! If there's something that makes it look like you are bad, you must drag it into the sun where folks can see it for what it is. You must clear your name, just as any other man would have to. There must be someone who knows you are innocent."

"Nobody," argued Curly. "Nobody's even interested in listenin'. I'm only a Whitson. Nobody cares what. . . ."

"I care, Curly," she said fervently. "Mother cares. Yes, and dad cares. I know he does. You've got to care as much, Curly. Go out and prove it to the world. We'll all help."

"Yeah," he answered bitterly. "Yore dad shore will help. He has helped . . . by firin' me. I'll prove somethin'. . . . But I don't know what it'll be!"

He turned away, his long arms swinging, his disturbed thought showing only in the jerkiness of his stride. Joanna followed him with her eyes for a moment.

Then, with a choked sob, she turned to run inside where her father still sat with Wyatt Earp. When the three of them came out on the porch a few minutes later, with Clawhammer bawling for Curly, the kid had rolled his plunder, saddled his personal horse and ridden away into the darkness. Heading east for the Roofless Adobe hangout of the outlaw—Curly Bill.

LAZING through the night, his knee hooked around the horn, Curly Whitson took stock of himself. In the wake of the high hopes that had inspired him during past months was now only a useless and muddy backwash. Nothing seemed to matter; nothing, save to have the game as well as the name, to go the limit and invite what fate had held for all the other Whitsons: whiskey; wild, reckless companions; a taunt at all the law stood for and, a gunshot grave!

To these things his existence had reduced itself and there seemed no protest left within him. Old Man Clanton and Frank McLowery, mouthpieces of one of the boldest rustler organizations along the whole Mexican Border, had been right. His place was with Curly Bill, Ringo and their easy money, high adventure, a reckless dicing against destiny's fatal stroke. A picture to warm the soul of youth, yet lacking the solid satisfaction and rewards of the picture that had been indelibly painted on his consciousness by Wyatt Earp, by Joanna Payne. The vision of hope, of faith and of an earned destiny.

Riding slowly, he discovered that, strangely, he bore no bitterness toward his idol, Wyatt Earp. Curly spoke the name aloud, felt a thrill shake him to his soul. That the marshal could picture something less sordid for the son of a rascal, lifted him above other men. That he had later erred proved that he too was human, that he was not omniscient, that he must have the principle proven.

Wyatt Earp . . . . and Joanna Payne. The first stars in the constellation of Curly's life. But there were stars hanging low in the southern sky, beckoning, luring. Stars over Mexico. . . .

Curly reined his pony southward. Somewhere down yonder lay the great Rancho Temescal and . . . .El Tigre. The one who had posed as the mayordomo, the one who had boasted of his heart—Paloma Vives, daughter of the *hacendado*. Curly grinned mirthlessly as he recalled the man's quaintly slurred invitation. "Pardon, my

frien', eef I rave. But I am warm weeth wine and romance. Truly, Curly *mio,* you must come to Rancho Temescal sometime and meet *mi corazon. . . .*"

And now Curly was answering him. "I'm takin' yuh up, you smooth-talkin' son. Comin' down tuh take a look at yore Señorita Paloma. Yeah, an' tuh talk over a little matter uh thirty thousand dollars."

He touched his pony with the spurs, broke it into a mile-eating lope toward the dingy promise of the sky-reaching Ladrones on the far southern horizon.

CHAPTER SIX

Stars Over Mexico

CURLY WHITSON had no trouble finding the Rancho Temescal. Succumbing to weariness in the early hours of the morning, he had off-saddled in a grassy *rincon* of the Cerros Ladrones and slept till the sun was half high. For hours then he had ridden across the vast rancho—an empire of grazing land teeming with shaggy wild broncos and long-horn Mexican cattle.

Twice he had passed small settlements belonging to the grant itself, where men were born in the service of the Vives, spent their lives as fine horsemen attending the estate's horned charges, and died there.

And now, from the top of a gentle, grassy rise, Curly looked down upon the home rancho where the real life of the *hacienda* centered. Here came statesmen and the military leaders of the republic for the sage advice of Don Rafael, who had been in his day one of Mexico's leaders. Here came cattle buyers from all over Mexico. Here too came dashing young *caballeros* with their hearts on their sleeves and with their eyes on Paloma, the beautiful, dark-eyed, olive-skinned daughter of the house.

And here now came the son of old Wolf Whitson with a determination that amounted almost to fatalistic desperation, looking for a darkly dashing man who called himself Don Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky. Looking for a stolen herd of three hundred blooded short-horns, thirty thousand dollars, or. . . .

For long moments, Curly eyed the hacienda, its sprawling, low-roofed *casa* of whitewashed adobe, the twin row of box-like adobes fronting a street-like lane —houses for the servants and vaqueros, the haystacks, the barns and brush *ramadas,* the cool-looking *alamosa* where the river bowed at the house and the rambling pole corrals. In one of these latter, a rider fought a bad horse, cheered on by the *"vivas"* and laughter of cone-hatted vaqueros on the top rail. It was toward this activity that Curly headed. And he had just dismounted near the corral gate when the *amansador,* or bronc fighter, swung down off his beaten mount, skipped jauntily to the gate and outside, his huge rowels singing, his chain quirt flicking idly at his soft, Russia leather boots. Outside the enclosure, he paused a moment to light a black cigarette, tossed his hand at the applauding vaqueros on the top rail, then lifted his dark eyes to Curly. It was Don Esteban!

The Irish-Mexican straightened in surprise. Then his face broke into an infectious smile and he was leaping forward. "Curly Wheetson, my *buen amigo!*" he folded Curly's hand in both of his own. "I am evorjoyed, my frien', that you should so soon return my most happy veesit. And how fortunate that you come today. Soon there weel be the *baile*—the dance! Weeth lots to eat and dreenk, amigo." He winked, jabbed Curly in the ribs playfully. "You shall meet the so-glorious Señorita Paloma—the soft little dove of Rancho Temescal. *Si señor,* and dance with her!"

"'*Nada,*" demurred Curly, with a gesture at his dusty range levis. "Not dressed like this."

"Ah, but no, my infant," Don Esteban hooked his arm through Curly's, shouted an order for a man to care for his pony, dragged him away toward the house. "You weel not be dressed like thees. We are of one size, amigo. You weel wear nothing but the best from my wardrobe. And such a grand caballero I weel make of you. Come! You are hungry and must eat, weary and must rest, dusty and shall have a warm bath. And tonight. . . ."

What use now all Curly's carefully prepared and rehearsed charges and demands? Indeed, Don Esteban hardly permitted him a long breath, let alone a speech. First there was food and drink in the kitchen, where Don Esteban flirted outrageously with the fat cook while Curly ate. Then to his own sumptuous apartment in one wing of the great, U-shaped *casa,* where mozos fetched a tub and pails of warm water from the kitchen.

What a way this Malarky had with him! How the servants jumped when he barked an order. Exactly like he were the *hacendado* instead of a bandit, living a lie for the sake of a girl's heart. As Curly pondered this while he scrubbed and shaved, an answer came to him that served to unlimber his temper toward the gay Irish-Mexican, that served moreover to increase his anticipation for the pleasure to follow.

Wyatt Earp had been wrong about Curly being a thief—he, who was so seldom wrong in his judgment of a man. How much more likely, then, that Curly might be mistaken about Steve Malarky? Tomorrow, after the *baile,* he would have a talk with Don Esteban. Tomorrow. For was not this the land of *manana?*

THROUGH the wide *salas* of the old *casa,* the softly stringed airs of Old Mexico ran in melodious whispers, played by an orchestra brought from far Hermosillo. In the wide garden patio, dancing couples swayed and pivoted in the graceful folk dances: *la Jota, la Zorita,* and the queer figures of *Las Camotes.*

Everywhere was laughter and good cheer; dark-eyed beauties in lace and sachets, with high combs and brilliants; caballeros in bolero jackets, braid-trimmed pantalones, gay sashes and *serapes.* Busy servants moved about with trays of cooling drinks, with *dulces* and good things to eat while carriages wheeled into the courtyard to dislodge their vivacious passengers. . . .

In a large side room Don Rafael had locked himself with a few favored cronies and numerous bottles of his favorite vintage. And there Don Esteban took Curly Whitson, arrayed now after the best traditions of the *caballero Sonoreño.* Brown as saddle leather, straight as an Indian, he cut a dash that would put a flutter in any maiden's heart, a figure that would command a second look, from concha-heavy sombrero to the Colt gun tucked into his saffron sash, and to the fancy-stitched half boots. Clothes may not make the man, but they help the pride.

Don Esteban was presenting him to the *hacendado.* "Don Rafael, this is my amigo, Curly Whitson, mayordomo of the Clawhammer Ranch in Arizona. A great vaquero, a fine caballero and a good friend. Curly *mio,* this is my *patrón,* Don Rafael Vives."

The grizzled, arrow-straight old Mexican with the fiercely bristling mustache smiled, bowed and gave his hand.

"My pleasure, Señor Whitson. Welcome to Rancho Temescal. I wish to thank you for your influence in getting me those hundred blooded cattle. And I trust that the payment was satisfactory. I look forward to their arrival here. You are young . . . . far younger than I had sup-

posed. *Ai de mi,* you *jovenes* are pushing us old ones into the background."

"But when we want to know something," retorted Curly, graciously, "we come to our elders."

"Well spoken," smiled the Don. "You too have a way with you. Even as my own matchless Don Esteban, with whose stalwart father I campaigned in my youth. Now off to the dance with you! Don Esteban will present you to the señoritas. You will find that he has a way with him in the more gentle arts."

"I have much to learn from Don Esteban's ways," said Curly grimly, and he wasn't thinking of dancing. He caught the mayordomo's dark eyes on him questioningly, then Don Rafael was answering him.

"He has many sides, our Don Esteban. To learn them, señor, you would have to stay here for a long time. And why not? I can use your Yankee aggressiveness and ingenuity. *Pues,* my own vaqueros are too deeply appreciative of their *siestas;* they think more of *fiestas* and *bailes,* than of the cattle and horses. And I am certain Don Esteban can make it interesting for you here. Why not?"

Curly grinned. "Why not?" he answered evasively and measured the Irish-Mexican with his eyes.

"Why not?" shrugged Don Esteban, and deep in his dark eyes was the shadow of an unplumbed query. When they were outside in the corridor again, the mayordomo probed for the answer to the restraint he read in the young American. "What did you mean, amigo?" he asked softly, "by saying that you had much to learn from my ways?"

"What do you think?" countered Curly, stiffly.

"The words themselves are innocent," suaved Don Esteban drily, "but the tone was foreign to our friendship. I ask myself what I have done to deserve it, señor, and there seems no answer."

"Mayhap your memory is shorter than mine," rejoined Curly, and felt both a twinge of shame and a thrill of excitement at the man's sudden stiffening. But before Don Esteban could answer, there was a chorus of girlish laugher, a rush of slippered feet and four shyly garrulous girls came up to capture the tall, handsome mayordomo.

Shamelessly they twitted him, squealing and giggling as he gathered the four of them within his long arms in a great bear hug. But not once did their laughing eyes leave the handsome gringo who, in all truth, they had set out to find. And so, with all the courteous flourishes so dear to the Latin heart, Don Esteban introduced them to Curly, beginning with Paloma Vives, a lithe, alluringly pantherish girl with hair like moonless midnight, teeth like pearls and eyes like the slumbering fires of a fine diamond set in old gold.

Nor did Curly hear the names of the other three señoritas, let alone acknowledge their presence. His gaze was riveted hypnotically and almost rudely on Paloma; and hers upon him. Both seemed unaware of the others about them. Curly heard himself stammer something unintelligible, felt the hot blood dye his face.

"Señor," she murmured, "I am happy to offer you the hospitality of Rancho Temescal and such pleasure as my *baile* affords. Are you not dancing a waltz, perhaps?"

"Si señorita, *un poco*—a little." Curly couldn't have said as much six months before, for, among the other things Joanna Payne had taught him was how to waltz. "A little."

She took his arm, motioning him toward the patio with a flourish. "We will dance, señor."

And so, unaccountably confused, Curly

allowed himself to be led to where young people flirted and danced in the light of a yellow, newly-risen moon. Now it was the turn of Don Esteban to forget the social amenities as he stared after them with a darkening frown. And inwardly he continued to frown while appearing to smile, as waltz after waltz was played, as Curly monopolized Paloma for dance after dance.

Then—Curly afterwards was at a loss to explain it—he and the beautiful Mexican girl were in a little side garden where the warbling of a mocking bird and the plash of a fountain were seductive accompaniments to the haunting strains of the dance music. They were alone, close together, where the garden wall cornered and where the fretted moonrays filtered through the pepper limbs like fairy candles.

"Beautiful!" she exclaimed, looking out across the moon-flooded garden.

"Beautiful!" he echoed, looking rather at her.

Their eyes met. And then she was in his arms, and Curly was raining kisses on her lips, her eyes, her hair.

"*Querido!*" she murmured, touching his face.

And then the spell seemed broken. With a lurch, she broke away from him, was running toward the patio where the dancing couples swayed. And Curly watched her go, his breath sobbing from him, his whole being in the grip of a torturing intoxication.

His eyes turned into the northern sky, aflame now with the full moonlight. What was there up yonder for him? Don Rafael had invited him to stay and to work here. Why not? Here, where the future promised a sweet largess. How much easier to stay here and be looked up to instead of going back and being looked down upon . . .in case he failed of his crazy quest.

A peaceful lassitude, followed in the wake of that thought. As if, in clearing his mind of the troubling incubus of the stolen Clawhammer herd and the thirty-thousand-dollar loss, he had consigned himself to the inevitable *mañana* of this warm land. And then a soft step jarred him out of that feeling.

Out of a side door of the *casa* stepped a tall form that came deliberately and resolutely toward him. It was Don Esteban—the man whom people liked despite the fact that he was the legendary El Tigre, the Border bandit. And it came to Curly in that moment why this was so. Don Esteban had proven himself, wherever he happened to be. Just as Curly must prove himself by Joanna's spartan formula. And to prove himself, he must succeed. . . . And return!

Don Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky came stiffly up, planted himself before Curly. His face was working, dark with rage. "So, my fast-working gringo rooster," he cooed, little demons of jealousy edging his tones. "Like the slinking coyote, you seek the dark solitudes rather than the light. Need I say that such an one, señor, makes love better than he fights."

"No need tuh say it, feller," rapped Curly, suddenly aflame with the animosity that had drawn him south, and relapsing to the English for better fighting expression. "But if yuh just can't hold it back, don't bet no important money on the idea—Mister El Tigre!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Tiger Prowls

DON ESTEBAN recoiled a step, stood there straight and stiff and proud. His left hand caressing his spike mustache, his right held close to the jeweled haft of the knife that slept in his sash. For a long moment he bored Curly with an un-

blinking and hostile stare. Then: "So," he murmured. "You know?"

"Know?" Curly scoffed. "Why not? Don't yuh think I know wolf sign when I see it on the trail?"

A bleak smile twisted the stern face of Steve Malarky. "The wise wolf, my smart young friend, leaves no sign upon the trail. That name you spoke—El Tigre—are we agreed that it is not to be used on this hacienda?"

"Takes two to make a bargain," grinned the kid, coldly. "I'll use it when an' where the fancy hits me. Not ashamed of it, are you?"

"Ashamed?" Don Esteban clipped off a laugh. "I am ashamed of nothing I have done or said, my friend. Nor do I beg favors of any man. It does seem, however, that while enjoying a friendly visit with Steve Malarky, you might respect his wishes in one matter. No?"

"I'm not enjoyin' a friendly visit with Steve Malarky," Curly corrected him. "I came here on business."

"Business?"

"Yeah. Business with El Tigre!"

Don Esteban lifted his brows. *"Bueno.* I shall be glad to go into that business with you, señor. But first, I must talk about this so-loving kiss I just witnessed; the loot of a traitor to this house. Before other business can be transacted, my rooster, you shall pay for that idle, gringo pleasure. After that, I will play the bear for the lovely Paloma. And sing to her of a beaten and repentent gringo blade. . ."

"An' sing a lie," added Curly, acridly, "which will be no novelty to El Tigre. I'll bet my outfit ag'in' yours that Paloma don't know who yuh really are."

Don Esteban flinched, grinned wrily. "I love a wager, amigo," he said softly. "But never against a sure thing. You have, w'at you say—call my bluff." He chuckled bitterly. "I laugh, señor, at the bravery we flaunt, you and I. We, who are both cowards. I am afraid to betray my past, Curly *mio.* Just as you are afraid to betray your past, and that of your fathers and brothers. You see, I too read the signs along the trail.

"I'm not ashamed uh my past," Curly ground out angrily.

"Nor I, my rooster. I'm proud of mine. Do you love Paloma?"

Love! The word stunned Curly. He hadn't thought of her thataway. She was beautiful and filled with the fire of her people. But somehow those qualities seemed to pale when he thought of the quiet, domestic dignity of little Joanna. And it was the devil in him that answered. "Why not, feller? Do you?"

"To the last drop of my blood, señor. I adore her as something of which I am quite unworthy. And knowing that you were no more worthy than myself, I could have killed you for kissing her. She is too good for us, my rooster."

"Shore she is."

"Ah . . . . We agree. Then let us both love her, from afar: Steve Malarky and Curly Whitson—outcasts. Will you shake hands on it, *amigo mio?"*

"Shore I will," answered the kid, impulsively. And did.

"Bueno," sighed Don Esteban. "We will seal it in a glass of *sotol,* my friend. And then will I sing to the soft little dove of Rancho Temescal of a dashing Americano who leaves his home land to talk business with a gay *bandido!"* His smile faded and his eyes grew hard. "And on the morrow, my rooster, we will get into that business."

Together, they entered the *casa,* aswirl with the gaity of the *baile.*

AFTERNOON of the following day, Steve Malarky and Curly Whitson loped swiftly northward into the breaks of the Ladrones, heading toward an unmarked Border line, searching for sign

of the herd that had been stolen from Clawhammer Payne. Curly, last of the fighting Whitsons, and El Tigre, cold-eyed, deadly legend of the Border.

After arising from the few hours' sleep following the *baile,* these two had gone into the business that had fetched Curly to Rancho Temescal. And the anger that had been his was as nothing compared with the ire that coursed the veins of Don Esteban. An ire that convinced Curly, plainer than argument, of the Irish-Mexican's innocence.

"So," he had hammered, a cruel smile twisting the corners of his mouth, "the coyote screws up his puny courage to sniff at the trail of the wolf. Bueno, my frien'. Eef thees 'Sus Ortego, my *segundo,* did not come to the Clawhammer Rancho weeth the money for those hundred cattle, eet ees he who ran the herd across the Line. A nice clean-up, amigo. I should have thought of the temptation to so weak a soul. Thirty thousand dollars' worth of cattle and ten thousand in gold. A tidy sum, Curly. Come . . . to our horses. You and me—we weel find thees Ortego!"

And so they had ridden northward, cutting the trail in midafternoon and following it into the hill breaks, Don Esteban with smouldering death in his eyes; Curly with the same thing in his holsters.

Now, deep in the canyon country, evening was upon them. The sun had dipped below the far flat horizon where the Gulf sliced north to meet the mouth of the Rio Altar. The two men had reined in their ponies, their eyes sweeping the suddenly-widened canyon, or *bolson,* that lay swimmingly purple in the cloak of inching shadows. The light was waning on the high peaks, the sky deepening to dull green that would soon become black velvet. But there was yet light enough to see the scattered cattle grazing in the lush flats. Short-horns!

The last signals of the roosting quail ran out to contented cluckings; bullbats croaked sonorously as they wheeled and fed aloft. A smutty gloom seemed to settle into the mouths of the feeder arroyos and down the breeze, pregnant with the night's relief from the heat, oozed the aromas of blazing cottonwood and peppery cooking. Through the screen of willows, a scant quarter to the right, the gay pennons of a campfire licked upward. Thin blue smoke spiraled gustily through the greenery. Softly muted, the chording of a guitar added its bit to the deceptive aura of peace that lay over the rugged spot.

"*Las Viboras!*" muttered Don Esteban sourly. "The vipers! There are your cattle, my rooster. For a few minutes, we will wait here till the light is gone. Then we will invite ourselves to supper."

Curly made no answer; he sat lax in the saddle, staring toward the ridge where the pines showed starkly black against the sky, where the evening star hung like a beacon just above them. In him was a fateful premonition of great danger, but none of fear. And a deeply welling admiration for this El Tigre—the tiger man of the South who reeked with sufficiency unto the moment he faced. Unconsciously he was lifting this one into his guiding constellation. The third star.

Now, with night shrouding again the uplands of Mexico, Don Esteban spoke softly to his horse, touched it with his spurs. Curly spurred up beside him and stirrup to stirrup, they cantered toward the dancing fire-glow. A scant hundred yards from the fire, they swept around the end of the willow screen and the beat of their hoofs intruded into the normal noises of the camp.

There was a swift shifting of forms from the fire; the snick of a shell being bolted into a saddle carbine; a bawled challenge: "*Alto! Quien es?* Who rides?"

"Malarky!" bellowed Don Esteban. And another voice took up the cry. . .

"Malarky! *Chingow,* eet ees not then the Yanquis! Come out, *mi guerreros,* it is the mayordomo!"

As Don Esteban and Curly swung down, the segundo and his riders came edging back into the light, their hands gripping guns, their eyes shifty with the threat of trouble. But striding boldly into the open came slender-waisted 'Sus Ortego, his swart, high-cheeked face clearly revealing his Indian blood. He flashed a slit-eyed grin and doffed his dusty sombrero, but there was little of humility in the action.

"Ah, mayordomo," he murmured, and there was a taunt behind the words, "that was the so-unwise thing to do. We have had trouble with the gringos. My men are nervous. They might have shot you."

"Better for you, by brave segundo," replied El Tigre, striding up to face him. "Far better for you if they had. What have you done with the money I sent to Señor Payne?"

"The money?" 'Sus Ortego seemed to quail. "Why, I paid. . . ."

"Don't lie to me, you slinking coyote. Where is that money? And why have you three hundred head of Clawhammer cattle, instead of only a hundred head?"

THE man looked about him, his eyes brightening that an armed and ready semi-circle of vaqueros was at his back. A slow and confident laugh shook him. "The money, *amigo mio,*" he smirked. "Why should we give it to a gringo *ranchero?* Is it not worth that much to Don Rafael that we bring him thrice the cattle? But yes. So, my dear mayordomo, we have divided it among ourselves. And have hidden it each in his own way, against our future needs."

"The work of thrifty and provident men," hummed Don Esteban, without once removing his stern glance from 'Sus Ortego's black eyes. "And the cattle—they go to the Rancho Temescal?"

Ortego swaggered, laughed aloud. "I am glad you bring that up, Esteban. We have argued the matter over well, my men and me. As yet we are undecided about the hundred head Don Rafael has paid for. But as to the rest, we are agreed. They offer us too bright a chance to start our own rancho. And it will not be wise for you, my handsome warrior, to try to block our plan. You, our once beloved mayordomo."

"If I block you, Ortego," purred the handsome Irish-Mexican, "it will not be as mayordomo of Rancho Temescal. Do you know who I am, amigo?"

Ortego stared curiously, struggling for Don Esteban's hidden meaning. "You talk in riddles, señor. Who might you be?"

"I am El Tigre!"

A gasp went up from the assembled vaqueros. The confident smirk was smeared off Ortego's swart face and his eyes grew wide. For an instant he stood nonplussed, then he regained his composure and his brows arched.

"El Tigre! Ah! Then we can welcome you into our brotherhood. There can be no less than perfect understanding between us. No?"

"No! Is there ever perfect understanding, my bold one, between the coyote and the wolf. No. I did not travel here to join a brotherhood of the damned."

Hot blood dyed Ortego's flat cheeks. His black eyes blazed. "Then you rode to your death, Esteban," he bristled. "I will kill you with my own hand, my tiger, and the shadow of El Tigre will be erased from these lands. In its place will be the flame of 'Sus Ortego and his band. Viva El Apache!" His eyes slid to the statue-like Curly Whitson. "And this gringo who rides with you, Esteben, he shall be killed with you—the first of many of his

treacherous kind to be sacrificed to the vengeance of El Apache." His eyes flicked to the edge of the firelight. "Venganza!" he called. "Come out here!"

Like a timid beast, a slender shadow came from a shadow glutted thicket; came furtively toward Ortego, with fear-filled, feverish eyes darting here, there, everywhere. It was a boy of perhaps fifteen. A skinny caricature of a boy whose sunken, burning eyes, whose emaciated body, whose dusty, ragged clothes spoke eloquently of undernourishment, of exposure and of the searing soul-fire that goaded him. He came to a halt before the one calling himself El Apache, his face twisting in a snarl as his eyes sought those of Curly Whitson.

Ortego laid a hand on the boy's gaunt shoulder. "Here," he hissed, "is Venganza—vengeance a-horse. The only survivor, señores, of the massacre of Skeleton Canyon. His father and three brothers were slain there, along with fifteen others of our countrymen by the gringos. He lives but to slay gringos and those who comfort them. It is to his gentle mercies, my gringo and you who boast of gringo blood, that I consign yore fates. Venganza—what shall we do with them?"

The boy looked first at Curly, then at El Tigre. He was trembling and small whimperings came from his furled lips. That his kid brain had been crazed by the horror of his experiences was, in that moment, horribly certain.

"Kill them!" he shrilled hysterically. "Kill them!"

"So be it!" smiled Ortego, and pulled the boy aside. *"Attencion, mis guerreros!* We will execute them after the manner of soldiers. Ready! Aim. . . ."

A sudden wave of self-preservation surged through Curly Whitson. He crouched and his hand stabbed for his holster. He knew as he did so that only an intervention of fate could save him. But fast as he was, Don Esteban was faster. . . .

There seemed no conscious expenditure of effort as the Irish-Mexican cleared the space between himself and 'Sus Ortego. The wavering firelight winked along the blade that flashed from his sash. One stroke he made, a terribly dynamic stroke that slashed the throat of Ortego almost to the spine, nearly severing the head from the body. . . The Tiger had made its kill.

The thing was so sudden, so awful as to almost paralyze Curly, and to give the vaquero executioners pause. Yet nothing in the world could have saved the doomed ones, once the shock of the killing had been translated into murderous rage, save the fate that now spoke from the darkened hillsides. Up there, gun-flashes split the night. Hardly had 'Sus Ortego's jerking body hit the ground before it was joined by nearly all of the would-be executioners.

From behind the rocks and brush of the hillside rose roaring phantoms, wreathed in the curling smoke of rifles that they levered with the deadly rhythm of automatons. A slug took off Curly's heel, letting him down flat as a leaden hail screamed over his head. The traitrous vaqueros of the Rancho Temescal writhing in death. 'Sus Ortego was lying in a welter of his own blood and Don Esteban hurled himself to cover, his pistol spitting as he ran. Venganza, the sole survivor of another such massacre, ran like a frightened deer into the thickets. Then there was the roar of hoofs as wild-eyed, bearded riders debouched upon the death spot—Gringos!

Curly, half stunned with the suddenness of the thing, took to the back of his trembling pony on the dead run, dug in the spurs and roared into the canyon, with streams of renegade lead following him. Luck rode with him, for he was un-

touched as he pulled his pony into a long trail lope, hurling himself through the threatening shadows toward the far Rancho Temescal. He was perplexed as to what had happened back there. And troubled that he must report to Don Rafael that he had, without doubt, lost ten thousand dollars . . . and one mayordomo.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gringo Weapons

WITH his horse limping badly from a bullet-cut hock, Curly Whitson reined into the bosky of a small creek as the moon came up. There he drew his rig, cleaned the raw cut on the animal's leg and picketed the beast handy to grass and water. Then, consumed with weariness, he lay down on a grassy hummock.

In him was a pang that he had lost Don Esteban, that courteous, dangerously courageous flame who had righted many a wrong and balanced many an inequality after the manner of an outlaw. Don Esteban—El Tigre—cut off from his horse, must have perished when the sky fell on Ortego's renegade camp.

Curly speculated on who might have engineered that attack, and all his speculation led right back to the same answer: Clawhammer Payne had organized a party of hard-riding, fast shooting cowboys and sent them over the Line with orders to fetch back the stolen short-horns. It had been done before; it would be done again. That would account too for their savagery, and for their desperate attempts to tally him.

It came to Curly with a shock that he, who had been fairly in the firelight, must have been recognized. And now nothing on earth could dissuade the Clawhammer outfit from believing that Curly, in all truth, had engineered this steal. That hurt.

What good now all his figuring to make good so that he could go back to Clawhammer—and Joanna—with clean hands? That was all over. Neither deeds nor words could now suffice to insure him a welcome there. Wyatt Earp would be convinced that all Whitsons were bad at the core. All that was left to tie to was Rancho Temescal and Don Rafael's offer of employment. And Paloma's smile. Well, those things were not without their compensations. . . .

Curly fell asleep, his head pillowed on his arm. When he awoke, the sun was shining in his eyes. He jumped up, confused for a moment as to where he was. His horse still grazed a rod or so away. But things seemed turned around. And with reason enough. The sun was low in the west. He had slept for somewhere around eighteen hours. And was hungry as a bear.

His horse was stiff, its wound scabbed over and giving promise of healing. Curly cinched on the saddle and rode. Just at dark he wandered into a sheep camp, where he ate with a pair of sullen, silent herders. Then he went on toward Rancho Temescal, and at last at dawn he rode down into the home hacienda of Rancho Temescal.

Swinging down, he led his mount toward the gate, stiffened. A figure stood there watching him. A tall, straight figure that seemed to stare at him with eyes that blazed. The light grew, disclosed that condemning figure as Don Esteban Buenrrostro Malarky. Or was it a ghost? The figure stirred, spoke.

"Por Dios! Curly Whitson!"

"Steve!" Curly ripped forward, his hand outstretched. "I was scairt they'd killed yuh back there."

It was not the gallant Don Esteban who drew himself up so coldly, who folded his hands behind his back. It was El Tigre, icily dangerous and scornful.

"Scared . . . *humph,*" he scoffed cynically. "Hopeful is the word; no, my rooster? You must have been very sure of it to dare return here after springing the trap."

"Trap?" Curly stared. "What do yuh mean?"

"I cannot answer, señor. For since it happened, I have puzzled as to just what your play was. But of one thing I am certain. You and that dog of a 'Sus Ortego planned to decoy me under the sights of the Clawhammer rifles, to destroy me and all my men. I fell for it like a *niño* a baby. But *El Señor Dios* was with me. I killed my segundo, just as I will now take pleasure in killing you!"

Curly's voice betrayed his astonishment. "You think—that *I* had anything tuh do with springin' that trap?"

"What else am I to think, my gringo? Why else would you have come here in the first place?"

"Why?" Curly flushed, seemed to grope for words. "Because . . . I was tryin' tuh clear my name an' prove myself."

"You sound drunk, my gringo," sneered El Tigre. "Clear your name of what?"

"Of stealing these cattle," blurted Curly, feeling his inadequacy of words. "Of bein' tied up in the deal tuh rob Clawhammer Payne."

"Ah," gloated the Irish-Mexican. "Then Senor Payne sees it as I do? But why, my gringo, do you return here now?"

THE sun was edging up out of a golden tinted east. From the *casa* came the bustle of activity, and a thrilling soprano voice lifted in a lilt of the song of the dove, *La Paloma.*

". . . si a tu ventana, llega una paloma,
Trátala con cariño, que es mi persona. . . ."

Both men cast their eyes toward the sound. Both knew it was Paloma Vives.

"I came this time," answered Curly, bleakly, "in answer to Don Rafael's invitation. Because I have nowhere else to go. I come to stay. There is now, since I was seen with you and your vaqueros in the death camp, no reason for my going back. And so good a reason"—his eyes again flicked to that lilting song—"for staying here."

El Tigre flushed and scowled. "You'll need to fight for that reason, my rooster," he rumbled.

Anger roweled Curly. "You've touched on that point several times, Tiger-man," he retorted sharply. "Touched on it too lightly. Don't expect me tuh crawl, feller."

El Tigre smiled coldly, bowed. "It shall be my pleasure to fight you, my infant. Guns, knives or fists. In the words of your so-eloquent cowboys, name your poison."

Eye to eye they stood in the sunrise. Each young; each filled with a warrior's passion. Back in the deep recesses of Curly's brain was a touch of regret; sorrow that he and El Tigre must fight over a misunderstanding. The same misunderstanding that had lost him the respect of Clawhammer Payne and Wyatt Earp. Had they killed him in the heat of that error, Curly would have died something of a martyr. Were he now to kill this dashing Irish-Mexican, the man would have died for something primarily false. And so Curly chose the weapon of those three that he was least proficient with—because there was no death sleeping within it.

"Fists," he clipped stiffly. "Peel yore bark, feller."

He slipped off his coat, flinging it from him. Don Esteban removed his bolero jacket. They faced each other, flushed, smiling, their toil-hardened hands balling into fists, strangely alike as to height and weight and build.

"Good, my young rooster," grinned El Tigre. "I weel treem your spurs. I weel show you how I learned thees game een your own Harvard College."

His left hand licked out, smashed Curly on the nose. It was a nasty, punishing blow that all but blinded the kid, filling his eyes with tears. Dashing them aside, Curly charged, both fists swinging. But not once did he tag the elusive target that danced before him. With taunting laughter, El Tigre smashed him cuttingly in the face, then in the belly, with jabs, jolts and hooks; with well-timed swings that cut and stung. Curly bored in, bleeding, gasping, trying.

Then, in a sudden rush, he caught El Tigre against the corral fence, smashed him with a pile-driving right to the ribs. A low curse came from the Irish-Mexican. And, with the fury of a fighting man stung, he lashed at Curly. A right to the chin knocked the young American sprawling. He was up now, coming in, only to collect another like the first. To his knees he went, then weaved to his feet, wobbling toward his now hazy tormentor. Another lightning stroke caromed off Curly's chin and the strength poured out of him.

He was falling, his consciousness ebbing in a blaze of colored lights. And even as he weaved downward, beaten, broken, out, he was conscious of a faint, far croak and the rhythmical drumming of hoofbeats.

But he lay where he had fallen in the dust. . . .

CHAPTER NINE

Gun-Panic

CURLY regained consciousness with a big sombrero swishing air into his face and El Tigre's hazy features gradually growing clearer. Behind the Irish-Mexican stood the gaunt form of Venganza—the hauntingly tragic lone survivor of the Skeleton Canyon massacre of Mexican smugglers by Curly Bill and his Roofless Adobe outlaws.

Curly sighed, shook his head, rolled to one elbow blinking. El Tigre's face was heavy with contrition. "Forgive me, Curly *mio,*" he murmured penitently. "Forgive me. I was wrong; I deserve the beating, not you. But surely, how could I have known?"

"Known what?" asked Curly, dazedly.

"How could I have known that those murderous gringos at 'Sus Ortego's camp were not your Clawhammer cowboys. They were the infernal *demonios* from the Animas Valley. Tell him, *muchacho,* what you found out."

"I escaped their trap," said the boy, in a hollow voice. "I rode my horse to the ridge lines, followed them as they took the cattle north across the Line. The heavy demon with the curly beard was leading them. Near the Cloverdale Rancho they halted the cattle to feed and rest while they went to the Double Adobes to drink and gamble and to bargain with Cara Diablo—Old Devil Face—for their loot. I slipped up close, señores, and heard this bargain closed. Old Devil Face bought the cattle for forty-five thousand dollars. Blood money, *por Dios!* Money taken in Skeleton Canyon, señores, over the quivering bodies of my murdered kinsmen. And, by his own words, Old Devil Face will drive those cattle through the San Luis Pass to the slaughter houses of Tombstone. Starting at noon today. . . ."

"Who does he mean?" asked Curly. "Old Devil Face, an'. . . ?"

"Your benevolently bearded amigo, the elder Clanton," explained Don Esteban. "And the one called Curly Bill Brocious. This *pobrecito*—poor little one—saw them both as he was escaping from that mur-

der in Skeleton Canyon, could never forget them. I have faith in the boy's story and am desolated that I mistrusted you, my rooster. Say I am forgiven."

"Aw, forget it," muttered the young American, allowing himself to be helped to his feet. "It was either you or me." He wiped blood from his oozing nostrils with his neck scarf, his eyes bright with a sudden thought. "I've gotta get outa here, Malarky. If I leave now, mebby I can somehow get hold uh that herd for Clawhammer."

"Alone?" Don Esteban lifted his brows. "But how, my stalwart one? And why, if this Clawhammer Payne thinks so poorly of you? You said you could not go back."

"That," explained Curly, "was when I thought those were Clawhammer guns at Ortego's camp—when I thought they had seen me with the ones who stole the cattle. But now I can go back. I must—and bring either the herd or the money."

"Money . . . ah!" Don Esteban's eyes fastened on a grizzled figure moving slowly toward them from the *casa*. "*Quidado*, here comes Don Rafael. He has money. Lots of it. More than he can spend in a dozen lifetimes. If it is money you want, amigo—"

Don Rafael strode up to them, nodding at his mayordomo, his brown eyes lighting at sight of Curly. "*Buenas dias*, Señor Whitson," he bowed. "I trust you are enjoying your stay on my poor *rancho*." And then as he noted the blood on the American's battered features, he started. "*Cascaras!*" he breathed. "What has happened to you, my friend?"

"His horse," Don Esteban pointed to Curly's animal, "rolled with him. It is as nothing, *patrón*, to one of these tough Arizona vaqueros."

"*Dios!*" murmured the *hacendado*. "You might have been killed, señor. Esteban, what of these Clawhammer cattle? Should they not be here?"

The Irish-Mexican nodded. "Of a certainty, save for a sad mistake, *patrón*. 'Sus Ortego drove the whole herd south. Three hundred head instead of only one hundred. They are being held near the Border for cutting. Or until an additional twenty thousand dollars is paid."

"'Sus Ortego!" snorted the Don. "Dunce!" And then his face lighted. "You mean I can buy the rest of those cattle, Esteban? At the same price?"

"The same strain, and the same price."

"That is good; I will buy them all. But twenty thousand dollars, Señor Whitson, I have no such amount here. I must arrange with my bankers in Hermosillo. Will you wait here till I get the money?"

Don Esteban laid a hand on Curly's shoulder. "He will wait, *patrón*."

"That will be well," murmured the *ranchero*. "I will write to my bankers and get a man started for Hermosillo at once."

He turned away, hurrying back to the house. Don Esteban smiled happily.

"You see how easy it is, my infant," he boasted. "And it is a pleasure for Don Rafael. He loves to write to his bankers, letters of great business importance."

"But the cattle," protested Curly. "Unless we get them back, we have nothing to sell."

"Tush," reproved the bandit. "Think nothing of it. I will tell him they are pastured high in the *sierra*. Don Rafael is almost a stranger to the saddle. He will believe me, amigo. And soon I will call his attention to something else to buy that will remove the blooded cattle completely from his mind."

The proposal was in line with El Tigre's policy of making the very wealthy finance his philanthropies. But Curly turned it down with no little distaste.

In the knowledge that the Clawhammer

herd was once again north of the Line, hope had sprung again from the ashes of his dreams. "No! If we get the herd back an' Don Rafael wants it, all right. Otherwise I don't want his money."

"Think, infant—with twenty thousand dollars, they will welcome you again at the Clawhammer! Don't be hasty."

It was said temptingly. And it was a temptation—the easiest way. But some finer sense in the youngster told him that even to entertain it was to dim the luster of those stars that guided him. He shook his head doggedly. "No! Nothin' doin'."

Don Esteban shrugged. "You are the so-strange Americano, Curly *mio*. The so-stubborn straight shooter. *Pues!* Then there is nothing to do but to go for the cattle. But, sadly, there are so few vaqueros here to ride with us. Four, maybe five. You see, the most of my men are now lying prey to the buzzards in that ill-fated camp of 'Sus Ortego. But so be it. We will ride, my rooster."

"And when we reach the Line," added Curly, enthusiastically, "we will send one of your men to the Clawhammer for help." But in the wake of that thought came another that darkened the ardor of his face. "No; can't do that. If Ol' Man Clanton should cut the Clawhammer boys tuh doll rags, nothin' on earth could convince Wyatt Earp an' Joanna that I didn't lead 'em to their ruin."

And so, as he and Don Esteban turned toward the *casa* for their breakfast, Curly's heart was heavy within him. He was filled with doubt. Behind them, the pitiful kid known as Venganza stared wistfully after them, forgotten by both in the rush of their project. The boy drew from the pocket of his ragged shirt a strip of jerky he had gleaned from some vaquero's camp, nibbled at it. But his bitter brain was racing.

"The Clawhammer!" he murmured to himself. "And help to kill Old Devil Face and his gringo *demonios!*"

Lithely he forked his scrubby, saddleless pony, turned it toward the broken hills to the north.

NIGHT was encroaching from the leaden east when Curly and Don Esteban and five Rancho Temescal vaqueros rode out of the tumbled hills and had their first look across the grassy flats of the Animas. Yonder, nestling in its cool fields and its dark *alamosa,* lay the Cloverdale Ranch, near which the Clawhammer herd had been grazed. There was no herd in sight now, which meant that Old Man Clanton and his riders had started them across the valley and into the dark slot of San Luis Pass through the Guadaloupes.

On the long, hard ride from Rancho Temescal, this little cavalcade bent upon salvage, had glimpsed more than once a lone rider, gaunt and angular against the skyline. Don Esteban and Curly knew that ghostly rider of the ridges to be the crazed one, Venganza. But the superstitious vaqueros stared at it as they would have at some omen of evil, and crossed themselves.

They were nervous and uncertain now as the young Americano led the way at a trail lope to cut the sign of the herd. In the air was the mystery that all animal life feels at the approach of night. And in the soft breeze of evening could be plainly heard the sibilant rustlings of the black robes of death.

With the fresh smell of cattle in their nostrils and the sign plain in the waning light, they sped toward the black maw of the pass. And the light was gone when they entered between its darkened walls and cantered boldly along the rocky trail. Their hoofbeats echoing startlingly from the rocky sides of the defile.

Their pace and their unwariness were

both based upon the well-understood speed of trailing cattle, and also upon Venganza's statement that the herd was to have been started at noon. But instead, Old Man Clanton had catered to the blandishments of a heavy hangover. He had delayed the start until after four o'clock.

Clanton, father of the two boys who were later to die at the hands of Wyatt Earp in Tombstone's O. K. Corral, was as merciless and rapacious a cut-throat as ever threw leg across a saddle, for all his benevolent looks and his hale heartiness. Trigger-swift, he hated the law and all it stood for and was crassly unaffected by the spilling of blood. By nature, by training he was a renegade, and a good one. And a good renegade leader insists upon almost military discipline when on the prowl.

Thus it was that he held a rider trailing far behind the herd to catch the first rumblings of any pursuit from the south. That rear guard, hearing the clatter of the cavalcade from Rancho Temescal, put spurs to his pony and warned Clanton. The first warning Curly and Don Esteban had of trouble, was a sudden charge of the renegades. And death spitting from the trail ahead.

Throwing his hands to the sky in a spasm of death, one of the Temescal vaqueros uttered a piercing, *"Madre de Dios!"* and died. His maddened horse bolted, whirling his body free at the talus and roaring back down the trail. The four companions of the dead man, already awed and fearful, gave way to gun-panic and stampeded, whirling their ponies, rolling their cruel rowels and pounding down the trail.

Don Esteban reached his rifle from its boot even as he bawled for his men to stand. Curly's horse reared as the kid palmed his holster gun, and the mount took a bullet in the skull and thrashed downward. Curly hurled himself clear, lit on his feet and darted for the cover of a nest of frowning rocks. Don Esteban's pony, bullet cut, broke and threw its rider headlong into a brush clump.

Then the two of them struggled upward toward the rock cluster, Estaban turning to snap a shot at the forms of the renegades who were sweeping back to make buzzard bait of these two remaining bravos.

Curly reached the jutting promontory first; got a foothold and reached down a strong left hand to help Estaban up the last of the stiff slope. Curly's six-gun kicked in his right; a dark figure; skulking with rifle among the talus threw his hands over his head and lurched down the steep incline to the rocky canyon floor. And then the two of them were bayed in the rocks, their guns bucking, their lead seeking out the sheltered gunmen around them. Two against a score. . . .

CHAPTER TEN

Arizona!

FOR long, dragging hours the fight had waged about that nest of rocks above the lonely defile of Paso San Luis. Inch by inch, Old Man Clanton and his riders had spread their encircling fan, until now, with dawn's promise in the eastern sky, they had closed the circle and were pouring a deadly fire toward its center.

Flattened in their precarious fort, grimed with powder smoke, their faces bleeding where richochetting rock chips had stung them, El Tigre and Curly Whitson peered into each other's eyes.

"How are the shells holding out, Curly, my infant?"

"Good, Steve."

"How many?"

"Three. And you . . . ?"

"Two, my rooster. Daylight will soon be upon us."

"Hang an' rattle, Steve. You an' me."

"You and me, infant. I can think of no prouder way to die than with empty gun, with a *buen compañero* at my side, and surrounded by my enemies."

Their hands met in a fervent grip. From the talus above them came a slither of movement. "They ain't returnin' our fire!" came a hoarse triumphant bawl. "They're either dead or outa lead. Everybody close in."

Don Esteban raised up, slid his rifle muzzle across the parapet toward the sound. Curly pulled him down. "Not that!" he whispered fiercely. "That's Ol' Man Clanton. There's still a few minutes uh darkness left. I'll slide out an' get him, if it's the last thing I do."

"No, *compadre,*" protested El Tigre. "He is for me."

"Cover me!" snapped Curly.

Then the blanket of darkness had swallowed him. He was burning to make answer in his last powder and lead to the renegade's one-time promise to him of, "excitement an' money aplenty."

Gray dawn came flowing over the crests of the Animas Hills and the Hachita Mountains. Now the eastern sky flamed with the splendor of burnished gold. Caught, Curly lay flattened under the guns of his enemies, stiffening himself for the fatal shock of a bullet's kiss.

From the direction of Arizona, a faint murmur of running horses rode the dawn breeze. Sharp and clear, like the challenge of chanticler, came the shrill coyote war cry of Arizona men a-horse. From his covert in the rocks, Old Devil Face Clanton voiced his warning: "Riders comin'! Hey you—Harry, hit fer the top an' see who it is."

From the timbered bottom came an answering clatter of hoofs. A rider surged upward, spurring his pony up a ridge to the mesa rim. Curly knew that rider, had seen him hobnobbing with his own father and brothers many a time—Harry Ernshaw. A swaggering, fearless thrill-seeker whose boast had it that he had never done an honest day's work in his life.

From the parapet of his covert, Don Esteban's rifle spoke. Ernshaw's horse surging upward, took the bullet meant for the renegade. It wreathed down, and Ernshaw darted into the brush as the one called El Tigre held his last shot. Watching this, Curly Whitson missed the sudden apparition that materialized on the rim immediately behind Old Man Clanton. A cadaverous scare-crow kid with a long knife glittering in his skinny fingers. Venganza!

The mad waif, living again the holocaust of Skeleton Canyon, had his eyes fixed below, where Old Man Clanton hunkered apprehensively. His frightfully triumphant scream tore through the rising clamor of approaching horsemen like the wail of some haunting ghost. . . .

AS CURLY'S glance shot to that weird sound, he caught the flight of the boy's form through the air, saw Old Man Clanton rise and whirl, his gun lifting for the death stroke. But the boy hit him as he rose and the two of them rolled down the talus, fighting like two wildcats.

Old Man Clanton's gun rose and fell. Venganza stiffened. The renegade leader rose over that twitching form, his murderous gun that lined now on the boy's heart.

Curly came to his knees. "Clanton!" he bellowed. "Here's yore ticket."

And as the renegade turned to face the new threat and whirled his gun-hand to meet it, Curly shot him through the heart. This last rustler trail of Old Devil Face of Skeleton Canyon was a trail of death. As he fell, his eyes glazed, his curling lips framed his last hate-filled curse.

Then this canyon of the Guadaloupes was chaos. Around a bend came a fiercely racing cavalcade of riders. The light was growing and a hoarse croak came from

Curly's lips at sight of them. They were the Clawhammer cowboys.

Grizzled Clawhammer Payne thundered in the van, his six-shooter flaming at the now-running renegades. Beside him was Wyatt Earp, firing unhurriedly and with deadly effect, and gaunt-eyed Doc Holliday, shrilling curses and emptying both barrels of his sawed-off buckshot gun.

It was over in seconds. When the few outlaws who escaped had crawled into the brush to coyote their way to a doubtful safety, five bodies lay sprawled among the rocks, and Curly, a little fearful of his reception, was striding with Don Esteban down to greet their deliverers.

In Clawhammer Payne's actions, he found no room to doubt. The gray cowman quit his horse and ran to meet them. "Curly, yuh wild young yearlin'!" He folded the youngster within his heavy arms. "Damned if you ain't give me about as uncomfortable a few days as I kin remember. I don't blame yuh fer ridin' away when I started givin' off head the way I done, but laws, the rawhidin' I've ketched from Maw and Joanna!"

His solemn expression was adequate conclusion. It warmed Curly, who found himself strangely tongue-tied. But it warmed him no more than the fervent hand clasp of the lance-like lion of Tombstone, the marshal with the chill blue eyes and the curling brown hair caressing his wide shoulders. His smile and his short speech were comforting.

"Glad I was still at the ranch and that Doc had come down to get me, when your Mexican lad rode in to fetch us. Happy that we got here in time; proud to know that my original idea of you was sound. And some ashamed that I weakened in my faith in you."

Doc Holliday throttled a spasm of coughing to grin at Curly. "An' I'm beholdin' to yur, Whitson," he croaked, "fer this little target practice against what's comin', shore as a .45, in Tombstone-town.

Wyatt Earp had turned to face Don Esteban. An electric silence seemed to settle over the death spot. "Well, El Tigre!" he said, quizzically, and fell silent as if awaiting something.

Don Esteban bowed slightly, flashed a wan smile. "Malarky, Señor Earp," he corrected softly. "Steve Malarky, mayordomo of the Rancho Temescal. I happen to know that El Tigre is dead."

"Thanks for the information," drawled the great lawman, and extended his hand.

The Irish-American turned to smile at Curly and lay a friendly hand upon his shoulder. "*Compañero,*" he said fervently, "it is you who have killed El Tigre. I will treasure these days spent with you to my last day, and will welcome more of the same. The job Don Rafael spoke to you about is still waiting for you. Do you ride south with me, my infant?"

Clawhammer emitted a bellow. "Not on yore tin-type, feller, he don't! He's comin' back to the Clawhammer where he belongs. Ain't yuh, son?"

Curly hesitated. "I'd like to," he confessed. "But there's one thing . . ."

"What's that?"

"Don Rafael Vives sent ten thousand dollars north by his segundo for them hundred head uh yore cattle. The man stole three hundred head instead an' got away with the money. He's dead, but the money's gone. Vives wants the three hundred head but, uh course, will only pay twenty thousand dollars more."

"Let him have 'em!" snapped Clawhammer. "They're feedin' yonderly in the San Bernardino Valley. I'll have my boys hold 'em there till Vives fetches the money. Satisfactory, Malarky?"

"Quite so," nodded Don Esteban.

"But that lost ten thousand," protested Curly. "I can't . . ."

"Ten thousand," said the burly cowman grimly, "is small price tuh pay tuh know that I've got yuh back an' that my wimmen won't rawhide me no more!"

Curly bowed his head in a sudden surge of thankfulness. Things had worked out. Past worries looked now like some vague nightmare. . . .

A horse clattering up to them roused him. It was the crazed waif, Venganza. He had an ugly bruise on his forehead where Old Man Clanton had buffaloed him. "Señores," he said, fiercely. "Old Devil Face is dead. But the curly beard and his men are still riding the trails. The debt is still unpaid. Some day—"

His lips clamped shut. In his sunken eyes brooded the shadows of failure, whose dreams of vengeance were still unfulfilled in defeat. He made a tragic figure, that stripling, so dreadfully alone, despite the four ghosts that rode at his cantle.

"Adios!" he cried.

He roared away to haunt again the high lookouts of Border ridges. And they watched him go, awed by what they read in his eyes. Then the cowboys had fetched Don Esteban's horse.

"I, too, say adios, señores," he murmured, mounting. "I go to bring back vaqueros and money for the cattle. *Vaya con Dios.*"

He whirled away and there was a lump in Curly's throat as the soft tenor of the man's song came drifting back. The song of the dove, *La Paloma:*

". . . si a tu ventana, llega una paloma,
Tràtala con cariño, que es mi persona. . . ."

And so Curly, with the rest, left that grim spot in the blue Guadaloupes and headed west with renewed faith toward his destiny. And though it was day now, with the sun pouring its warmth deeper into the gloomy arroyos, his stars burned high and clear before him. Three stars: Dashing Steve Malarky, a bright star over Mexico, Joanna Payne, a star that drew him, as iron is drawn to the magnet, and Wyatt Earp, greatest law star of the Border. . . .

THE END

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A Great Novel of Two Fighting Badge-Toters

BADLANDS LAWMAN

By WALT COBURN

WANTED MAN'S GAMBLE

In the badlands of the Big Muddy, Bob Bierce showed Jay Thorne, Texas outlaw, a faded reward notice—and gave him the choice between double-crossing the man who trusted him and a Border hang-noose! It was then that Jay Thorne learned how the darkling ghosts of the past may sometimes be wiped clean in gunsmoke. . . .

BOB BIERCE dragged a yearling heifer up to the branding fire. Bierce was top hand for the Wagon Spoke outfit and prided himself on the fact that he was the best heeler in Montana. Meaning that he never, or hardly ever, missed catching both hind feet of the critter that he threw his rope at.

"One of ourn," he said, his thin-lipped mouth pulled in a faint grin.

Sam Spokes and his partner, Mac Dunlap, each with a tally book in his hand,

A Montana Badlands Novelette

By WALT COBURN

marked down with stubby pencils another Wagon Spoke critter. Mac Dunlap, long-faced and dour, with his gray, reddish hair and beard, looked like an Airedale turned into a human being. His eyes were the brown eyes of a fighting terrier. There was a Scottish burr in his voice when he was angry or had an odd drink too many. Penny-pinching, shrewd, but no cowman, he depended a lot on his partner, Sam Spokes, and their wagon-boss, Bob Bierce.

Sam Spokes knew a little about a cow outfit, but it was Bierce who knew all the right answers.

An odd pair, Mac Dunlap and Sam Spokes. Dunlap had run sheep in Canada for ten years, but with hard winters, early spring storms that took toll on the lambing crop and poor prices for wool, Mac Dunlap had sold out his sheep and had gone into the cattle business in Montana with Sam Spokes. Sam Spokes, who was as different from Mac Dunlap as night is different from day.

Sam Spokes was a gambler, saloonman and mining man. Red-faced, bull-necked, heavy of build, he had fought his way with fists and gun from El Paso to Nome. He was as crooked as the track of a rattler; as crooked as the dour, pipe-smoking Mac Dunlap was honest.

Then Bob Bierce. Bierce had known Sam Spokes here and there along that same crooked trail. Tall, black-haired, quick with a gun, he was a lone wolf if ever one lived. Claiming no man's friendship, hiring out at fighting pay to the toughest outfits he could find, Bob Bierce was a killer, with a killer's heart and brain. Naturally, he was right-hand bower to the heavy-shouldered, battered-faced Sam Spokes.

"One of ourn." Bob Bierce looked at Sam Spokes, and in that brief glance the two men exchanged there was a silent message. Mac Dunlap missed it.

The man handling the branding iron burned a Wagon Spoke on the yearling's left ribs. Another man earmarked the

heifer. Bob Bierce rode back to the herd.

The freshly branded yearling, its tail twitching, trotted back to the herd. Bierce roped a calf and started for the branding fire. He had hardly reached the fire when a tall cowboy on a gray horse cut a cow and calf to the edge of the herd. The freshly branded yearling was promptly claimed by the cow that wore the Tumbling T brand. The cowboy drove the cow, calf and branded yearling up near the fire.

"Mistake on this Wagon Spoke branded yearlin'," he said flatly. "You saw this cow claim it. I want that Wagon Spoke vented and a Tumbling T put on."

BOB BIERCE sat his horse, with his weight in one stirrup. His black eyes looked at the cowboy, who met Bierce's gaze with a faint, contemptuous grin on his deeply tanned face. He had corn-colored hair, blunt features and gray-blue eyes.

"What's the argument?" called Sam Spokes.

"The Tumblin' T rep claims a mistake on that yearlin'."

Mac Dunlap looked up from his tally book, scowling a little at the Tumbling T man, then at the heifer. Oddly enough, the yearling heifer chose that moment to steal some milk. The cow let her drink. Plainly this was a sucking yearling that had not been weaned.

"The mon's right," said Mac Dunlap. "Ye'll make it right, Bierce. Correct the mistake."

There was an ugly look on the dark face of Bierce as he roped the yearling again. The Tumbling T man rode back to the herd.

Sam Spokes got to his feet and walked over to his foreman. Bierce scowled blackly. "Who is that man?" asked Sam Spokes.

"He goes by the name of Jay Thorne."

"Ain't that his right name?"

"It might be or it might not."

"He's wide awake, anyhow. Don't try anything that will get him too suspicious. No damned blunders. Can't afford 'em. You've played 'er too open lately. Mac ain't dumb, even if he did start out herdin' sheep. No more mistakes, Bierce."

Bob Bierce turned his horse and rode back to the herd, his thin-lipped mouth a twisted line. He hated Sam Spokes. Sam had enough on him to hang him, and the big cowman never lost an opportunity to make Bierce aware of their respective positions. But at the same time, Sam Spokes was just a little afraid of the black-eyed killer who did his dirty work and drew top pay.

Bierce rode up to the Tumbling T rep, Jay Thorne. For a long moment, as Bierce rolled and lit a cigarette, the two men looked at one another. Then Bierce spoke, hardly moving his lips: "Long ways from the Mexican Border to Montana, ain't it, Thorne? Even when a man travels light and fast."

"You'd ought to know, Bierce."

"I ain't denyin' it. I don't pretend to be anything but a tough hand. But I'm wonderin' if Senator Stevens knows that you had to leave Arizona in a hurry. Old Stevens is fussy as hell about the men he hires—wants 'em honest. It'll pay you, Thorne, to not make an enemy out of me. Think that over when you go on third guard tonight."

JAY THORNE was saddling his night horse after supper when Mac Dunlap approached him.

"Ye've an upright way about ye, mon, which be far more than I can say about many a mon I've come in contact with since I went into this business. I'm hopin' ye'll bear no ill-will on account of that mistake brandin'. I would rather go back

herdin' sheep than to have the reputation of bein' a cattle thief."

"Mistakes happen, sir. They happen in every outfit."

The gangling, red-bearded Scotchman moved on to the mess tent, sucking his pipe. Jay Thorne looked after his retreating form, smiling faintly.

New to the country in this part of Montana, Thorne was a stranger in a strange land. He wondered if the red-bearded cowman was as honest as he pretended to be. Jay Thorne distrusted men who bragged about their honesty. If he was so honest, why was he in partnership with a crooked gambler like Sam Spokes, whose reputation was bad from Canada to the Mexican Line? And why did he hire men like Bob Bierce? Why had Mac Dunlap talked to him just now, when only a few hours ago Bierce had threatened him. And Sam Spokes had ignored him completely. Damned queer layout, any way you wanted to look at it. What kind of luck would he have here repping for the Tumbling T?

When Jay Thorne went on third guard at midnight his guard partner was a young cowboy they called Hungry. A skinny-legged youngster, about seventeen, with freckles and a rather long, pointed nose and buck teeth. A willing sort of cowboy; a green hand who spent his forty a month on gaudy cowboy raiment which older hands grinned at and joshed him about. He was some sort of relative of Mac Dunlap. Mostly, Hungry was in the way.

But during the ten days that Jay Thorne had been repping with the outfit he had grown to like the loose-jointed, freckled boy. Hungry was so eager to learn all about the cattle business, and he wasn't fresh. Tired as he'd be at night, he was always asking the cook or Bierce if there was any chores he could do. He'd help the cook with the dishes and be rewarded with pie. But Bob Bierce had, on one or two occasions, jobbed the boy after a fashion that made more than one cowboy want to take the wagon-boss to a whipping.

They had not played jokes on Hungry during the last day or two while Mac Dunlap was with the wagon. But Mac Dunlap and Sam Spokes had gone back to town after supper. Tomorrow they would be hoorawing the young cowboy again.

Mac Dunlap had frowned upon the nickname, "Hungry." So, in the presence of the red-bearded ex-sheepman they had called the boy by his right name, which was Angus. But until Mac Dunlap's next visit Angus would become just Hungry, the butt of rough cowboy jokes, and someone for Bob Bierce to pick on.

"I see you're carrying your six-shooter, Jay," said the boy as they rode out to the bedded herd.

"I usually pack a gun."

"Me, too," nodded the boy, taking a pearl-handled, nickel-plated six-shooter from the pocket of his orange colored angora chaps.

"So I've noticed," said Jay, trying not to grin. Somebody had sold Hungry that ornate-looking weapon that was of an inferior make and so cheaply finished that you couldn't hit the side of a barn with it at twenty feet. Save as a club, it was worse than useless. As useless as those heavy angora chaps on a night as warm as this, or as the fifty-foot rawhide reata which entangled Hungry every time he tried to use it.

"Did you ever kill any men, Jay?"

"Nope. Hope I never have to."

"Has Bob Bierce?"

"He's killed a couple or more, so they claim. He's bad medicine, from the way they tell it around the Wagon Spoke."

"If I was you, Jay, I'd watch him. I heard him talkin' to Sam Spokes. They was quarrelin' about somethin'. And Bob

Bierce told Sam that you'd last as long as a snowball in hell unless you come around to his way of doin' business. Sam told him to go easy and that he'd better let up on the bottle before he took a few drinks too many and make a fool of himself. And that Uncle Mac was gettin' suspicious. What all did he mean by that, Jay?"

"Hard to say, button. But you keep that talk to yourself."

"Then Sam said that I might not be as thick headed as I acted and Uncle Mac might have a reason or two for sending me out on the round-up. And Bob Bierce said it would be just too damned bad if a horse was to fall with me and break my neck. And Sam told Bierce he was talkin' loco and to get rid of any comical ideas he had along that line. You think Bierce hates me and has it in for me that bad?"

"It won't do any harm to be careful, Hungry. Bierce is a snake; he hires these cowboys and they take his orders. Don't trust a damn' man of 'em—not even the cook. Let me know if you pick up any more news."

"You bet, Jay. Uncle Mac said I was to trust you and to watch you if I wanted to learn about the cattle business. Uncle Mac's on the square, you can bet on that."

"How come he ever got to be partners with Sam Spokes?" asked Jay, wondering if Hungry was not cannier than he seemed to be, for all his greenhorn ways.

"I don't know. I never ask Uncle Mac questions."

"He don't look like a man that'd be givin' out too many answers," agreed Jay, grinning.

They rode together, half way around the herd that was lying comfortably on the bedground. Then they split up, each going the opposite direction.

JAY THORNE had plenty of food for thought. Bierce's threat, his talk with Sam Spokes; the boy, Hungry. And his own unpleasant position here as rep with the Wagon Spoke. And somehow Bierce had learned about that trouble in Arizona. Or else the man was a lucky bluffer.

That past part of his back trail he had hoped to forget, to wipe out. He was not at all proud of any part of it, especially the running away. But fate had dealt him a hand from the bottom of the deck and piled the odds against him, and now that same bad luck had overtaken him.

Could Bob Bierce actually know the real facts—the real honest-to-God facts behind the Border newspaper story that had branded Jay Thorne as a cattle thief and killer throughout the cow-country? Or was he using only that newspaper version? At any rate, he had Jay Thorne in a tight.

He had worked for the white-maned Senator Stevens for about a year. And he liked the tall, soft spoken old gentleman who had a failing for good horseflesh, politics, and the ranch that he had built up from the early days. The Senator claimed that no cowman had to be dishonest to make a living. He had sent more than a few cattle rustlers and crooked cattlemen to the pen.

Jay Thorne wondered why the Senator had sent him, a new hand at his ranch, to rep for the Tumbling T, especially to the Wagon Spoke outfit that had a bad reputation, to represent an outfit you had to be a top hand and a trusted one, and Senator Stevens hardly knew Jay Thorne. That was something more to think about and figure out.

Jay Thorne's musings were interrupted. Riding towards him in the moonlight was a man. No mistaking that rider's seat in the saddle. That was Bob Bierce. Jay loosened his gun in the waistband of his overalls and rode to meet the Wagon Spoke ramrod.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead or Alive!

WHAT at first sight appeared to be a gun in Bob Bierce's hand proved to be a bottle of whiskey. Bierce seemed a little drunk. He had been running one of his nightly poker games in his private tent and passing the bottle to the players, especially to the ones losing.

A shrewd gambler, Bierce, who had one or two of the men in the outfit working as cappers for his game. They would somehow let it be known to new hands that Bierce expected his men to play poker and do a little drinking. It would be wise to sort of sit into the game now and then. . . .

Jay Thorne had seen the light in Bierce's tent when he went on guard. He had heard the sound of subdued voices and the click of poker chips. Until now Jay Thorne had never paid any attention to what Bierce did. But tonight seemed to be calling for some sort of a showdown.

"Herd layin' all right?" asked Bierce, uncorking the bottle and shifting his weight to one stirrup.

"Layin' purty."

"Have a drink, Thorne. And hell, forget what happened about that damned yearlin' and what I said. Janglin' over a damned calf won't buy neither of us a thing. Here, take a drink."

Jay Thorne took a small drink. If Bierce was playing a game, he'd play with him. Bierce took a stiff drink and corked the bottle. There was a thin grin on his face as he rolled a cigarette.

"No need of old Senator Stevens ever knowin' about you bein' mixed up in that scrape in Arizona, when them two Border Patrol men got killed. Hell, mistakes will happen. And I've handled my share of wet cattle, and then some. But a man kin make more money up in Montana than he kin down on the Mexican Border, and Bob Bierce is the gent that kin put you onto the ropes. . . . Why don't you set in that little game that's usually goin' on in my tent of a night? Me and you better have a medicine talk one of these evenin's."

As Hungry came riding up, Bierce rode off, whistling between his teeth.

"Wasn't that Bierce?" asked the young cowboy.

"That was the notorious Bierce, none other. Bierce, the killer. Damn it, is that a gun in your hand?"

"I recognized him, Jay. I thought if a gun play came up, I'd help you out. I ain't much of a shot, but—"

"Hungry, you better leave that gun in your bed. Leave gun work to older hands. Guns get a man into trouble."

"But gosh, Jay, Bierce is a killer and you're the only man that's treated me like I was human," the boy said.

"And it was damned white of you, pardner, to feel like you did about helpin' me. But Bierce could empty his gun into you before you could thumb back the hammer."

"I got it cocked, though."

Jay looked at the boy, then at the fancy gun. "Hungry, ease the hammer down on that thing. And for God's sake quit pointin' it my way. It might go off and kill a steer. Point it at the ground, and let the hammer down slow!"

He didn't want to hurt the boy's feelings. The loyalty of the freckle-faced Hungry was something not to make light of. Jay did his best to handle the situation. He knew how Hungry treasured that worthelss gun; it was hard to find the right words to talk Hungry out of his beloved six-shooter. So he resorted to a little justified lying.

"I packed a gun when I was about as old as you are. Got in a row and shot a feller with it. Had to quit the country.

Had to live like a hunted coyote. I wish you'd kind of lay the gun aside for a few weeks or a year. I'd hate to see you get into the kind of trouble that I got into."

Hungry seemed impressed. "I won't get into trouble, Jay. Honest. Uncle Mac wouldn't like that."

THEY rode together around the herd. Hungry told Jay about his brothers and sisters and his widowed mother up in Canada. They raised wheat up in Alberta. One of his sisters was going to teach school next fall. Mac Dunlap had sent for Angus and had given him a job working around the ranch, sending him to school in the winter. . . .

Jay reckoned the moonlight night was making the boy homesick. There were times, nights like this, when Jay remembered the only home he had ever known. A small cow ranch down below the Mexican Border.

As the boy talked, Jay but half listened. He was thinking of that Sonora ranch. Of his father, who had been a cowboy and had saved enough money to get a little start of his own and marry. Jay could remember the hard, barren years of struggle. The dry summers; the gaunt cattle; the windmill at the ranch, creaking dismally. There were the clouds of dust made by starving cattle coming for miles into water, shuffling slowly, red-eyed, slobbering, often to die during those days when the sun was a ball of hot brass in a pale blue sky.

The dust storms; jerky and beans and sourdough bread and coffee and sometimes dried fruit. The little garden and the few stunted flowers his mother had tried to grow. That country is hard on a woman; it dries her soft skin and brings wrinkles. Jay had seen his mother grow old in the years he grew up into youth.

Then there had been the time when drunken Mexican rebels had raided the ranch. His father and another cowboy had gone down fighting. But before Jay's father had died he had held his wife in his blood-smeared arms, had kissed her good-bye, then had ended her life with his last bullet. That was the only way. Jay, fourteen years old then, had fought alongside his father and the other cowboy until a bullet had hit him. His mother had thought him dead. She had covered his unconscious, bullet-torn body with a tarp. And there, unable to move or talk, helpless, he had watched that bitter tragedy through a red haze. A day or two later a Mexican rancher had found him and had nursed him back to consciousness and life. . . .

Handling cattle came natural to him. He did well. He went into partnership with another American cowboy. They built up a good herd, leased grazing land on the United States side of the Border, bought Mexican cattle and fetched them across, paying the customary duty. He and Chuck Brown made money, though Chuck spent his on booze and gambling and Border dance-hall girls. Well, that had been Chuck's own affair.

Rumors came that Chuck was too friendly with some Border rustlers—a tough outfit, mostly Texas and Oklahoma renegades. Then, by a damnable twist of luck, Jay had been caught in the law net that was spread along the Border; caught with a bunch of his own cattle that Chuck had just brought up from below. At least Jay had Chuck Brown's word for it that the cattle had been paid for; that the cattle had been inspected and everything was legal. Chuck hadn't wanted Jay to go across with the cattle that night, but Jay had wanted to go.

In the moonlight, the Border Patrol men had tried to hold up the herd that was crossing the Border. Somebody had commenced shooting. Chuck Brown and two renegades had been captured and two

Border Patrol men killed. Chuck Brown, in order to get his prison term lightened, had involved Jay Thorne. Jay had escaped jail and quit the country. . . .

All those hard, bitter years of work and hardship gone for nothing. Now he was riding with a price on his head at the mercy of men like Bob Bierce.

". . . and I'll show you her picture tomorrow, Jay," Hungry was saying. "Of course you can't see the color of her kinda red hair and brown eyes in the picture, but gee, she's pretty. And smart at school. Mary was always at the head of her class. I bet you'd be awful stuck on her, Jay. . . . I brought some biscuits and meat. Here's yours."

"Uh? Oh, yeah. I ain't hungry. You gimme just half of one. Thanks, pardner."

BIERCE came up to him the next night. "Poker?" he asked. "The game will start about first guard time. Three-four of the boys are after my scalp. Better join 'em."

"Suits me," agreed Jay. "I ain't got much to lose. Anyway a man looks at it, I ain't got much to lose." He grinned faintly.

"Now," said Bierce, his black eyes studying the other man, "you begin to talk my language. Come over to my tent and we'll hoist one. Outa my special bottle."

"Don't care if I do."

So this was Bierce's way of playing the game! Well, he'd play him, card for card. Trick for trick.

Jay Thorne drank with Bob Bierce in the latter's tent. Neither of them said much. The remuda was brought in by the horse wrangler and they went to the corral to catch their horses. Jay pretended not to notice that two or three Wagon Spoke top hands were talking together in a group that carelessly broke up when he came out of Bierce's tent with the wagon-boss. Nor did he miss the fact that Hungry, near the mess tent, had seen his little visit.

That night, about first guard time, Jay Thorne sat into the poker game.

Seldom do you ever see a new deck of cards around a round-up camp. But Bierce broke out a new pack when Jay joined them in the tent. "In honor of the Tumblin' T rep. And by God, we'll make it your deal. Ruffle 'em up, Jay."

The bottle passed the rounds as the night wore on, as jack-pot after jack-pot was lost and won. Jay had worked with quite a few outfits, but this was the first one that combined cattle work with whiskey and gambling. A man didn't need a bed to work with this spread.

At two o'clock a cowboy came into the tent. He had the guard watch in his hand.

"Your guard, Thorne."

Jay nodded. "Be with you in a minute. There's ten bucks in this pot that I want."

Jay won the jack-pot and cashed in, seventy dollars winner. He was a little dizzy from the whiskey and too many cigarettes, but his head was clear enough as he rode out to the herd with Hungry.

The boy was silent, too silent. He knew that Hungry had seen him gambling with Bierce and the other tough hands of the Wagon Spoke. He had a strong suspicion that Hungry had listened to some of the conversation that had passed back and forth in the tent. And he knew that the boy suspected him of treachery and was therefore hurt.

But he couldn't confide in a kid like Hungry. This game he had set out to play was too dangerous to take any man into his confidence. The less Hungry knew or suspected, the better.

For the first time the boy had little to say during the two hours' guard. And tonight he did not offer Jay part of the

lunch he always carried in his pocket when he went on guard.

They stayed with the cattle until relieved, a little after four in the morning. Then they rode on to camp. Jay noticed that Hungry still packed his fancy six-shooter.

Near the bed wagon was a buckboard. That meant that Sam Spokes was back at camp. And that he was alone, because Mac Dunlap always came in a top buggy.

JAY turned his night horse loose and started for the mess tent. It was still dark. Out of that darkness he heard Bierce's voice, low pitched, cautious. Jay halted behind the bed wagon, listening.

"I got Thorne's brand read right, I tell you. He'll play marbles with me. If he don't, I'll—"

"Don't talk so damned loud. I heard a man ride up."

Jay slapped his night horse on the rump, dropped his saddle on the ground, and came around the bed wagon from the other side of the rope corral. He was heading once more for the mess tent, noisily now. His spurs were jingling. The night horse, a biscuit lover, was following him. Jay knew that Bierce and Sam Spokes were watching him.

He had finished breakfast when Sam Spokes came into the lighted mess tent. "Howdy, Thorne. How's things goin'? Don't let Bierce work yuh too hard. We don't work as hard here at this outfit as some of them spreads down along the Mexican Line."

Jay nodded, dumped his cup and plate in the dishpan and left the tent. He knew that Sam Spokes would follow him outside.

He was right. Bierce was out there, over beyond the mess wagon.

Cowboys were busy catching out the work horses for the mess wagon and bed wagon, getting the half broken horses harnessed, ready to move camp. Tents and corrals were already down; bed rolls were being loaded.

There was no sign of Hungry. He had wolfed his breakfast and faded into the black-gray light that precedes dawn. Somehow, as Bierce and Sam Spokes halted Jay near the mess wagon, the Tumbling T rep knew that the boy was within earshot.

"We're movin' over on the Muddy," said Bierce. "Makin' a small circle that won't amount to a damn. If you was to be put on day herd, Jay, you might be able to pick out a shade bush in a coulee and kind of ketch up with your sleep. It ain't no disgrace for a rep to go on day herd. Find a coulee and bush up. You won't be missed till dark. Camp will be at the crossin' on the Muddy. Hell, you know we'll take care of any Tumblin' T cattle we run acrost." He winked and grinned.

Jay looked at the two men and nodded. The outfit was getting close to the river which divided the Wagon Spoke range from that of the Tumbling T. It was rough country, and many an unbranded critter might belong on either side of the dividing line that separated the two outfits.

Let some of the fast roping cowboys from the Wagon Spoke cross that Muddy River and they'd reap a ripe harvest. A man didn't have to be a native-born Montanan to savvy the game. When he should be attending to his honest job of seeing that every critter needing a Tumbling T brand got one, there would be the Tumbling T rep sleeping off a jag in some coulee. An old game, that had tempted more than one rep who had worked with the Wagon Spoke round-up representing the Tumbling T.

"I am kind of short on my sleepin'," grinned Jay. "Them long night guards takes the waddin' out of a man."

"There'll be another long night guard tonight," added Sam Spokes. "I wouldn't be surprised if there was a five-hundred dollar jack-pot on the tarp there in Bierce's tent. A little bluffin' and it might belong to a Tumblin' T man with a bob-tail flush. . . . Then again, if that Tumblin' T rep didn't play his cards right, he just might lose."

As Sam Spokes walked away he dropped something on the ground. It was a square of cloth, across which was printed, in black lettering the offer of the thousand-dollar reward, dead or alive, for Jay Thorne.

CHAPTER THREE

Hungry Makes a Hand

JAY THORNE read the reward notice, shoved it into the pocket of his overalls, and rolled a cigarette. Sam Spokes and Bierce were putting him in a tight spot. If he went on day herd, couleed-up under a bush, he could sleep off the effects of last night's whiskey and poker. And he would stand to win a five hundred dollar bribe from two men who were stealing cattle from Senator Stevens. That was their game; as dirty as black mud.

He cussed them behind closed lips. Then he walked over to the corral that was down, ready to be coiled up and loaded. There was a big, rawboned buckskin horse tied to one wagon spoke of the bed-wagon. The big horse was striking and kicking at every man that came near to unfasten the corral ropes from the wagon which is one part of the round-up corral.

"Cut the son loose!" called the impatient nighthawk who drove the bed-wagon, was still encumbered by a few hundred feet of corral rope. "Cut that damned bronc loose!"

"And have that Tumblin' T rep kill me?" pleaded the horse wrangler, a quarter-breed. "I ain't cuttin' that horse loose!"

Jay got to his horse just in time to hit a man who had a wagon spoke in his hand. Jay hit him hard. As hard as a man can hit when he has weight behind his fist and the cause of the fight is a horse.

"Stand up and taste of the rest," said Jay, and there was a calmness in his tone that kept the man from getting up.

"Don't tromp me, fer Gawd's sake, Thorne!"

Jay kicked the man none too gently in the seat of the pants. "Next time you go after a horse with a wagon spoke, mister, be plumb sure there ain't a white man around. This horse belongs to me. My own private horse. Gentle as a kitten. Any you boys like to try him? No? Then stand away or I'll bother another skunk or two that thinks he can club-whip a horse of mine."

The horse followed Jay like a kitten. The camp was breaking up now. All the circle riders had gone. Spokes had ridden off horseback with Bierce.

Jay watched the wagons and remuda get under way, then he headed for the drifting, grazing beef herd. He rode into a cut coulee, dismounted, and sat down on the ground to roll a cigarette. He was obeying orders and he knew he would be watched. Hobbling his horse, he stretched out in the meagre shade of some buck-brush and dozed. He'd need that short sleep before he was finished with the job he had ahead of him.

He only dozed, his hat partly covering his face, his long frame in a twisted position so that he could be on his two feet in a split second. And his right hand gripped the .45 concealed by the edge of his brush jumper.

Somewhere, down there along the Muddy, the Wagon Spoke would be

stealing Tumbling T cattle, and tonight Bierce was supposed to let him win some money in that poker game—a Wagon Spoke bribe. But it wasn't worth five hundred dollars of Sam Spokes' money to gather a few head of mavericks. There was something bigger than that going to happen. Sam Spokes wasn't taking a hand in the game for any penny ante business.

What had fetched Sam Spokes back to the round-up wagon? Hell, he'd come back to win a real jack-pot. That was the only answer.

From the brush Jay watched his horse. The same line-backed, wise-headed outlaw dun that had fetched him from the Mexican Line. The hobbles that fastened the horse's front feet were made of cotton string; a kid could break them. That was a secret between the man and horse; a trick Jay had taught the horse when it was a colt.

The big dun had never been ridden with anything but a hackamore. He was wise; wiser than a lot of men, and when those black ears went erect, that was a signal. Jay caught it and waited, gripping his gun, half hidden by the bushes.

A HORSE'S hoofs drummed on the ground; Jay heard the creak of a new saddle, the jingle of spurs and rattle of bit chains. Only one man in the outfit could make that much noise, and there was only one new saddle in the outfit. The cheap, noisy spurs and sheepherder or dude bit chains. . . . That would be Hungry, coming down the coulee. Good.

Hungry would take a message to the Tumbling T ranch, and another message to get to Mac Dunlap. Maybe he was playing the fool to jump at long conclusions, but Jay Thorne would stake his life on the fact that Sam Spokes and Bob Bierce were double-crossing Mac Dunlap and trying to pull a fast trick on Senator Stevens. Hungry could get back to the Tumbling T ranch or the Tumbling T round-up wagon with a message.

Hungry was riding at a trot. Jay lay quietly, listening, watching; mostly, he was watching the ears of the big dun horse that had been an outlaw for four years, until Jay had taught him how to be a one-man horse.

Hungry rode up and swung off with a quick jump. Jay found himself looking into the muzzle of the young cowboy's gun.

"Damn you, Jay! Damn you! You make a move and I'll kill you! I heard what was talked about in that poker tent. And I heard what Sam Spokes said to Bierce about you all cheatin' on Uncle Mac and stealin' from Senator Stevens. How they had bought you off and how they'd take care of Uncle Mac if he showed up there along the Muddy. And how they had the Tumbling T brand changed into the Wagon Spoke with a few strokes of a hot iron. And now, damn you, I got one of you!"

Hungry's voice was high-pitched and shrill. He stood there in the early morning light, his cocked gun covering Jay from a distance of not more than twenty feet. The boy's hand was shaking.

"I got you covered," the boy's high, loud voice continued. "Stand up and reach for the stars!"

Jay got slowly to his feet, as if he were too drunk to stand. Then suddenly he twisted, whirled, and the gun in his hand spat flame. From beyond the now bewildered Hungry there came the sound of a man cursing and groaning.

Disregarding the boy, Jay was on his horse, his smoking gun in his hand. The big buckskin knew his cue. String hobbles snapped. Jay rode down the man who was trying to get mounted near a brush patch. The man's right arm hung limp. Jay's boot-toe caught the man in

the face, sending him backwards. Then Jay quit the saddle and had the man by the shirt collar.

"You're the damned son of a snake that went after my horse with a wagon spoke. Then you tried to kill a kid because he knew too much. Behave yourself or I'll beat your damned head off."

Hungry rode up at a run. He was panting and his freckled face was white. He still had his gun in his hand.

"We'll have to fix this gent's arm, pardner," said Jay, glancing up over his shoulder. "Then you take him to the Tumbling T ranch. Quit gawkin', damn it, and put away that pop gun. Never mind the questions—we're in a hurry!"

HUNGRY obeyed. Jay applied a tourniquet to the man's bullet-smashed arm. The man cursed him and the boy through gritted teeth. Profanely, angrily, he told them how he had planned to kill them both.

"Sam Spokes was fool enough to think he could bribe you, but Bierce wasn't that dumb. He hired me to kill you and the kid. He said you'd be drunk and asleep and the job would be a cinch. And he hated the kid's guts. I'd have got the kid, only for you. But listen, mister, you ain't turnin' me over to the law. Not unless you want to hang for murder down on the Border. I was along that night. Yeah. I'm one of the gang that knowed Chuck Brown. Turnin' me loose, Thorne?"

"Take this snake to the Tumbling T ranch, pardner," Jay said to Hungry. "If he tries to get away, kill 'im. Here's his gun. Use it instead of yourn."

"Gosh, Jay, I didn't mean to shoot when. . . ."

"We'll talk that over when we're a lot older. Now what's all this about changin' a Tumbling T into a Wagon Spoke?"

"I heard 'em talkin' about it. Bierce and Sam Spokes. It's easy as anything. I told Uncle Mac about it and he's tellin' Senator Stevens. See, here is how the brand is changed."

Hungry's forefinger drew a Tumbling T in the dirt. A few added strokes, and the brand became the Wagon Spoke. "They got some steers with the brands worked like that, Jay. Steers and cows. And that stuff is drifted into Wyoming and sold to some crooked butcher that supplies meat to the big grading outfits that work for the railroad and state. Uncle Mac don't get a dollar of that money. Bierce and Sam Spokes split it. I heard 'em talk about it. I even seen their tally of the stuff they branded."

"You ain't as dumb as you let on to be, Hungry."

"Mebby not. But I was dumb enough not to know you was playin' possum there in the coulee and that you wasn't crooked. Shucks, Jay, when I think of that, I—"

"All right. Tell the Senator I've gone to the Muddy to gather in Spokes and Bierce and enough evidence to hang 'em. Tell the Senator to send me men down there to hold them cattle. Tell 'em to ride their tops and fetch their guns. Git!"

Jay hoisted the man into the saddle and tied him there. Fear showed in his eyes.

"Do right by me, Thorne," he pleaded, "and I'll do right by you. I'll clear you of that charge down yonder—so help me God, I will! I kin clear you down in Arizona. I put Bierce wise to you. I give him that reward notice. You never recognized me because you only seen me once, that night you was with us driftin' them stolen cattle acrost the Border. I kin make Chuck Brown come clean with the real truth. I'm Chuck's half-brother. Jay—don't let me bleed to death!"

Jay's voice was metallic, his eyes hard. "Take him to the ranch, Hungry. It'll be up to Senator Stevens. And I'll fix that arm so he won't bleed to death. He'll live, but he'll lose that arm. Take him away, pardner."

JAY THORNE reckoned that the one man planted by Bierce to watch him would not be the only one whom he had to fear. If they were pulling off a big steal, such as Hungry had claimed they planned, there would be more than one man along the trail to watch him. So he took another route that would get him to the Muddy about sundown.

Jay Thorne felt like a man freed from jail. Senator Stevens would have ways of getting the real facts from the killer, whom Hungry was taking to the Tumbling T. Even if Jay Thorne got killed, it would be an honorable death. The name left behind him would be without a blot.

But Jay wasn't going to die if he could help it. He had his horse and guns and a knowledge of the country. He knew what odds he was up against. Down through the broken country, he rode the twisting trail, trusting to God and luck and his courage. . . .

The black ears of the horse twitched a danger signal. Jay reined up, his hand on his gun. He sat there, nerves taut. From somewhere not far distant, came the sound of bawling cattle being moved. Jay Thorne was getting to the border of the danger zone, and it was still too light to show himself. He needed moonlight which would cut down the odds against him. He pulled off into the brush and dismounted.

Sundown, then twilight. And in the gathering dusk the sound of cattle became plainer.

"We'll be into it before long," he told his horse. "Into trouble up to our ears. If this is goin' to be our last ride, feller, we'll make 'er a real one."

The moon came up out of the dusk, a round white ball. It showed the uneven, broken skyline. The sky became star-filled as he hit the main trail that the herd would be taking. This would be a night drive with restless, boogery cattle, probably without water for a couple of days because they'd travel along faster on empty bellies. And they'd be damned easy to stampede.

Cowboys would have their hands full tonight. The Wagon Spoke herd, gentle stuff, with two men on guard, was already bedded down now. Every other Wagon Spoke cowboy would be used to move this other herd of stolen cattle. They'd be riding their top horses and packing saddle guns. And they'd be ready for any kind of trouble.

Jay Thorne pinched out the coal of his cigarette and took a look at the stars and moon. Same sort of a night he'd found many times down in Mexico and along the outlaw trail and he had traveled from his home. Somehow he thought of Hungry, and the kid's home up there in the wheat country in Canada. A real home with a little old pump-organ and hymn books and a Bible. Sometimes Angus must get mighty lonesome for that quiet, peaceful home, despite the fact that he packed a fancy, useless gun and wore orange-colored angora chaps, even on the hot days, watching his shadow. A game kid, Hungry. . . .

A horsebacker was coming from back yonder. Jay pulled off into the brush and pulled his gun.

THE sound of horse and rider came closer, breaking brush without thought of making a noise. Jay groaned inside. Then he wanted to laugh, or cuss.

That damned new saddle, creaking. Bit chains rattling; spurs with do-dads that made 'em jingle. A horse that was winded. Jay shoved his gun back in its holster.

"Take 'er easy, Hungry," he called from the brush, "and for the love of God, don't shoot. And will you tell a man how you got here and where the hell you left that gun-toter, and why in hell you . . . Don't yell or shoot. What in hell is this all about?"

"Gosh! Jay! Uncle Mac is down here somewhere, alone. I took a cut across and saved time to get here. I left that man at the Tumblin' T ranch, like you told me. The Chink cook has him locked up and is standin' guard with a shotgun. Senator Stevens wasn't there. He'd gone to the round-up wagon. Uncle Mac is headed for the outfit down here and he's goin' to kill Sam Spokes and Bierce. And Gosh, Uncle Mac ain't even got a gun!"

"Pull down that hollerin'," growled Jay, walking over to where the boy sat his horse. "You're yellin' like a drunk Injun, an' . . . . Gawd!"

Hungry had collapsed in his saddle. Jay caught the reeling form in his arms. Hungry's hands and shirt were sticky with blood. The boy had been shot.

"A feller shot at me back there a few miles. I took one at him but I don't know if I hit 'im," Hungry gasped.

"I bet you made a bull's eye," said Jay. "Here." He handed Hungry a filled muslin sack that had once held sugar. Now it was filled with food. It had dropped out of the boy's pocket. Hungry grabbed it, his eyes bright.

"Cold chicken—prairie chicken! The Tumblin' T Chink gave me this lunch."

"You stay here and eat," advised Jay. "Take off them spurs. I'll slip the bridle off that horse and tie him in the brush. No matter what happens, you stay here. Lay low. No noise. Movin' might make you bleed plumb to death. There's a bunch of stolen cattle bein' moved past here directly and I can't have you in the road. I'll locate your Uncle Mac."

CHAPTER FOUR

Big Muddy War

A SING-SONG chant sounded over and over with the bawling of cattle. The same chant in a high-pitched, nasal tone: *"Ho. . . . Ho. . . . Idaho. Ho. . . . Ho. . . ."*

Jay Thorne, listening, carressed the hammer of his six-shooter. He knew that chant; knew the voice and the one man that always sang that way to cattle. That man would be no other than Chuck Brown. Chuck, who should be serving time in the pen—or had the crooked cowboy been pardoned? Or escaped? Anyhow, that was Chuck Brown there on the point of that herd that moved through the moonlight and shadows. Chuck Brown, who must be working for Bierce.

Then Sam Spokes' big, husky voice: "Dammit, Bierce, you drunken double-crossin' fool, it wasn't in the cards for you to hurt Mac Dunlap. Who in hell do you think you are, killin' a man like Mac? My pardner, that married my kid sister. Mac didn't know me then. Didn't know it was my sister. I'd kept her up in Canada in a school where they' look after her. She died durin' the hard winter that Mac lost his sheep. I went to her funeral where I met Mac. I sold him half interest in this outfit. Mac was my pardner. And damn you, Bierce, you killed him when he showed up down here. . . ."

Shots tore through the bawling of thirsty cattle that were now smelling water and had hit a trot. The *"Idaho. . . Ho. . . Ho. . . ."* chant was lost in the rumble of the stampede. Hell had broken loose and was on the sharp tips of a thousand horns. The stolen herd was scattered, crashing through a hell-filled night.

Jay Thorne and his big buckskin horse were caught in the rush of the stampede, riding ahead of the horn-tossing leaders. There was a confusion of sounds: the crash of horns; crazed bawling, and then the scream of a crippled horse smothered under the avalanche of cloven hoofs.

In that moment that seemed eternity, Jay and his horse were free from the mad rush. Jay rode with a gun in his hand as

the big, line-backed buckskin twisted and dodged to freedom. Then out of the dust and inferno of noise the white, scared face of a hatless rider showed in the moonlight. For the flash of an instant Jay's eyes and the horror-filled eyes of Chuck Brown met. Then Jay had picked the other man from the saddle as Brown's crippled horse went down.

As quickly as it had started, the stampede was over. A white-maned cowman on a big black gelding was giving orders to a score of cowboys who were beating into submission a like number of badly bruised Wagon Spoke men. Senator Stevens had a deep sounding voice that, when raised, could carry far above lesser sounds.

"Get every damned man of 'em! Kill 'em if they show fight. Save Jay Thorne for me! Save that damned Tumbling T rep, because I need a young bonehead like him to ramrod my outfit! Corral the Wagon Spoke rustlers! Where in hell is that Angus boy?"

And Jay heard all that but dimly while he clubbed at Chuck Brown with an empty gun. Jay had emptied his gun at the leaders of the stampeding herd, trying to turn them back. On foot now, there in the moonlight, he fought with Chuck Brown who was coming at him with a knife.

A lucky smash knocked the blade from the hand of the hard-fighting Brown. Jay, staggering and bleeding, tore into the other man now with his bare hands. It was Senator Stevens who pulled Jay's hands away from the Brown's throat.

And that was the last Jay remembered for a while.

HE woke up in the light of a campfire. He saw a badly battered but very much alive Mac Dunlap with his arm across the shoulders of Hungry, who was gnawing on a chunk of half-broiled steer meat. The same meat that Mac Dunlap and Senator Stevens were broiling over red coals on the end of Wagon Spoke branding irons.

"I heard him, mon," Mac Dunlap was saying, sucking on his old brier pipe. "I heard Sam Spokes call the hand of that Bierce, after Bierce had left me for dead by hittin' me on my head. I dinna care what sort of a mon Sam was, but he died game. Aye, Sam's gun was too slow to save his life, but quick enough to put a last bullet into the dirty heart of Bob Bierce.

"Angus, lad, pass me the bottle. The Senator and I wull be needin' a wee nip, and perhaps Jay wull want one when he wakes up. He's lost blood, has that mon, but i' a bonny cause. A mon's honesty and good name are things to fight for. Remember that, Angus. And Angus, lad, see if Jay is able to sit up and have a nip. He's the new foreman of the new outfit that combines the Wagon Spoke and Tumblin' T."

Plainly, the dour-faced Mac Dunlap was in his cups. Senator Stevens, in badly torn flannel shirt, weather-beaten overalls, one arm in a sling, his battered hat pulled across his eyes at a rakish angle, might have been taken for a cowboy grown old in the harness. His eyes under bushy black brows were twinkling. The prisoners tied to the wheels of the mess wagon and bed wagon would spend many a long prison night and day remembering. Especially Chuck Brown.

Oddly enough it was Chuck Brown who first noticed that Jay Thorne, there on the bloodstained, tarp-covered bed on the ground, had opened his eyes.

"No hard feelin's on my part, Jay. They'll likely hang me after I've told 'em the truth. I never was no good. My father was no good. He was one of the renegades that killed your folks. I come by it natural—bred in me. I was after you from the start. No hard feelin's. . . ."

Then Chuck Brown grinned twistedly.

He rolled over on his face. Rolled over on the blade of a knife that he had kept hidden under his shirt.

"This clears you, Jay!" Then the blood came from under his body and he lay with his face in the dust.

"Ruins a mon's appetite," said Mac Dunlap, taking a stiff drink.

So ended the stampede that united the Wagon Spoke and Tumbling T outfits.

IN Canada, in a clean cabin, between clean sheets, Jay Thorne was being nursed back to life in the home of Angus Dunlap. And it was only when Mary Dunlap had promised to become the bride of Jay Thorne, that Angus, a plate of fresh doughnuts near his reach, showed a faded picture to Jay.

"Like I told you that night on guard, Jay, the picture don't show her hair like it is. Sort of red. Or her eyes like they are. But ain't she purty, even in the bum picture?"

"You bet. How about it, Mary?"

"Angus might be your top hand and all that," replied the schoolmarm older sister of the boy, "but when he drags out that darned picture of me I could kill him. You mean, Jay, he showed you that when you were standing guard with him?"

"He sure did," lied Jay, winking at Angus, "and right then and there I was in love. How about it, Hungry?"

Hungry nodded. He looked from Jay to the ornate, pearl-handed six-shooter in its fancy holster on Jay's bedpost. Jay lifted the belt and gun down and handed it to the boy.

"Crooks, both of you," said Mary.

"I just did a little swappin'," said Jay, shoving the faded picture under his pillow. "Fair trade is no robbery."

And when Hungry, the plate of doughnuts in one hand, belt and gun in the other, had taken his leave, Jay and Mary looked at one another. Then Jay grinned.

"The Tumblin' T rep claims a mistake brand. She don't belong to the Wagon Spoke any more. She's mine. All other brands vented."

"There were never any other brands, cowboy. Just a maverick. I belong forever and then on to the Tumbin' T rep."

THE END

In the August 1st Issue *Published July 12th!*

A Thrilling Novelette of Frontier Range and Boom-Town

HELL-BENT TO HANG!

by JACK BECHDOLT

by
RAY NAFZIGER
(Author of "The Man Who Cursed Texas," etc.)

THE OUTLAW

Bill Dirk didn't kill the puncher whose carelessness cost the lives of Bill's wife and kids. He let him go—to live through nights of torture and days of hell. Yet, strangely, in Bill Dirk's own embittered soul lay the power to drag that hapless cowboy back through the burning purgatory of self-reproach to manhood.

ALL his life Bill Dirk had been a fighter. When a five-year drought had given the banks his cattle and his big desert ranch, cheerfully Bill Dirk had started building up again on mountain range. His only assets had been a wife, two babies, a pair of old ponies and a wagon tied together with bailing wire.

With him to his new range went one of his crew, Rodey, a giant rider with a shock of flaming hair and a none too bright mind. And it was through Rodey that

FROM HELL

A Novelette-length Story of Longrider Retribution

disaster struck again one night, when Dirk had sent his family on ahead with the big simple-minded rider to establish quarters in a cabin.

That night the stove, its chimney improperly insulated against the dry shakes of the roof, set the shack afire. The one exit from the cabin, the door, had been hung by Rodey to fit so tightly that Dirk's frantic wife could not open it.

By the time that Rodey, sleeping outdoors under the wagon, was aroused, the cabin was wrapped in flames. He jerked open the door and managed to bring out Dirk's wife and the two small boys. They were charred beyond recognition.

The next morning, Dirk had ridden in to find his cabin in ashes, and the horribly-burned bodies of his little family lying under a blanket. And Rodey, the hair singed from his head and face, his hands and arms great blisters, blabbed it

all out—about the door, the boarded-over windows and the stove—and begged Dirk to kill him.

Bill Dirk had not killed the man; he had sent him away and buried his loved ones. Even after this overwhelming blow there was still courage left in Dirk to fight. Indeed, fighting was the only thing that could keep him from going insane. But the fight of building up a ranch was not enough: his fighting took a more strenuous channel, a savage protest against the whole sorry scheme of a life so filled with disaster.

Dirk had turned outlaw, as a hurt rattler strikes in a mad blind fury. Once the kindliest of men, he had become hard, emotionless; the shrewdest, most cunning of the wolf breed that challenges the law. So shrewd that even when the law finally caught Dirk and handed him a life sentence, he slipped out in five years, pardoned by influential friends.

No one expected Bill Dirk to reform when he got out. Members of his old band had a dozen proposed bank and train robberies to offer him. Still another proposition came to him in a letter from one Ira Gale, manager of the big American-owned ranch in Mexico, known as Hacienda Casas Grandes. Gale had ridden in Dirk's outlaw band, but had reformed and had secured a job as manager of the half-million acre ranch property. For years, Gale wrote Dirk, he had been in full control, and all during that time he had been quietly working out a plan to loot his employer.

Gale had a herd of eight hundred choice Morgan horses from two to seven years old, ready to be stolen by a confederate and driven north across the line and sold in the United States at fancy prices. That confederate had to be a man that Gale could trust—not only to steal and dispose of the herd successfully, but also honest enough personally to split the proceeds with Gale. Bill Dirk was the man he needed, and Gale's letter, sent by a trusted messenger invited Dirk to ride to the Hacienda Casas Grandes to complete plans.

IRA GALE was shocked when he saw Dirk swing from his saddle and enter his office. The Dirk that shook hands with Gale was a gray, gaunt ghost of the big-framed ex-rancher who had turned outlaw leader and had ramrodded a bronc gang along wolf trails from Border to Border.

Ira Gale, weighing his visitor with eyes that were lusterless clay marbles, decided instantly that he'd made a mistake. This man was but a husk of the outlaw chief that he had known. Dirk was broken in spirit and in body, unfit to lead an expedition to raid a kid's toy bank.

He wasn't the man that Gale wanted, to turn the trick of running off and peddling those eight hundred choice Morgans. No stove-up, jumpy-nerved outlaw would do for that swift raid. Gale had too much at stake to consider him for a moment. It would have been a job for the Dirk that had been, not for this haggard, oldish man who held his untasted drink and listlessly looked at Gale's office with its desk, filing cases, and comfortable leather chairs.

"You got it soft here, Ira," observed Dirk.

Gale, who had accumulated a thick layer of fat over his short, stocky body, nodded. "Sure," he admitted. "Five hundred a month; no work to speak of; a Chink to cook for me and my American foreman. We even manage to slip our drinks in on the ranch bills. An' the owner lives in New York and don't come out once in two years."

"I'm wondering," said Dirk, "why the hell, with a rockin' chair cinch like this, you take chances?"

Gale downed at a gulp the drink of Madero made-in-Mexico cognac, poured himself another without inviting Dirk to join him, and hunched his soft body forward. "Me?" he rasped. "Me, take chances on this job? Not any! When word comes to me that them Morgans is stole, I take their trail with fifty riders, and if we catch 'em between here an' the Line, the buzzards will fatten up on horse thief meat. Whoever takes this job runs all the risks, savvy?"

"I savvy," said Dirk, but Gale frowned. There was no snap to Dirk's voice; no force. Dirk wouldn't do. They had busted him in that prison, and the poor fool didn't realize it.

"Man, but you're a scarecrow," said Gale with open contempt. "What did they do to you behind those stone walls?"

Without answering then, Bill Dirk turned his back and gazed out at the white-washed high adobe walls and tiled roofs of Hacienda Casas Grandes. A town lay within those walls which housed the employees' families of the hacienda, but Dirk wasn't thinking about them. He saw only the walls of the corrals and houses and stables. A sea of walls.

Walls like those of the prison at San Simon, housing men in cells of oven-like heat, six to each slimy airless box, a vermin-infested hell where men were crushed and broken. . . .

What had they done to him, Bill Dirk was thinking. They had given him five years of days and nights. Minutes and hours without end, listening to men with eaten-out lungs, coughing and fighting for breath in the close, coffin-like cells. Given him five years of walls that had seemed to press so close on him that he could not raise his head; five years of idleness, with nothing to do but think.

Thinking back on his life, and that night when his wife and sons were burning alive in that death trap while the cursed half-wit, Rodey, had slept like a drunken man a few yards away. Rodey, who had made it impossible for a woman to open the door, who had put up the stove so carelessly as to allow it to set fire to the roof. That's what prison had done for him. Given him time to think. That, and not the prison itself had broken him.

Shoulders lifted, he pivoted suddenly to face Ira Gale. Before the snarling grin twisting Dirk's thin lips, the eyes that blazed above the sharp bones of the thin face, Gale shrank back.

"Want to know what they did to me, do yuh?" spat out Dirk. "Well, they hung five years of days and nights about my neck, damn them! Twenty-four lifetimes to each day, and nothing to do but think. They done a-plenty for me, Gale. So damn' much that if you and your fifty greasers caught us, I'd feel sorry for yuh. You'd be the ones to be ground up in buzzard craws."

IRA GALE had courage; more than once the stocky ranch manager had taken knives from marihuana-crazed *mozos*, but Dirk made him shiver now. The man was sheer tiger; enough fire was in his eyes to face down a pack of wolves. Gale drew a deep breath. And he'd thought this man was busted!

"Take another drink, Bill," he urged, "I'm havin' another myself. You make me shiver, Dirk, with that talk about five years hung around your neck. Forget that. Those Morgans are all ready—I had 'em rounded up last week and throwed into a little valley. All ready to be grabbed off by your outfit. We'll take a little *pasear* into that country today, with a bed and some grub, and look over the route north. Guess you got your men where it won't take long to bring 'em below the Line."

"They're down here already," said Dirk. "You saw 'em yourself, Ira. My

men were those two outfits of trappers that asked you for a permit to camp in here. They offered to clean out some of your mountain lions."

"Those your men?" asked Gale, startled. "I never dreamed it. You swing your rope fast, Dirk; you always did. You and me, we'll clean up."

"We will if those Morgans stack up as good as you wrote. They ought to bring anyway a hundred thousand dollars."

"Maybe better that by fifty thousand," said Gale, "with you handlin' the deals. The German army has buyers up in the States. They'll pay two hundred a head for the poorest half of the bunch. The best will bring from a man that likes horses all that's in his pocket. That's how good they are."

Confidence flowed full tide through Gale again. Bill Dirk was the old Bill Dirk, only more sharp-brained and ruthless. And he could be counted on to play square; to deposit fifty cents of every dollar to Gale's account in an Eastern bank.

After Gale had sent out an order to have their pack mules and saddle mounts made ready, the two sat working over plans. At this time two circumstances would help their play. The first was that the daughter of the owner had just arrived from the East with a party of friends. Secondly, a half-revolutionist, half-bandit, named Gil Torres, was operating with a band of men to the east of Casas Grandes. The blame for the horse raid could be put on Torres; and Gale would delay pursuit of the thieves, using the excuse that he had to keep men near headquarters to protect the owner's daughter and her friends from a bandit raid on the hacienda itself.

When the pair went to get their horses, they found the great walled enclosure which contained horse corrals and wagon yard and sheds buzzing with half a dozen activities. In a small corral a pair of American bronc busters were working a bunch of young saddle stuff. At another, Mexicans were breaking young mules to harness, hitching them to huge wagons alongside staid, older animals. At still another corral men were cinching a half dozen English type saddles on horses for the daughter of Blake Dozan, owner of Casas Grandes, and her party.

Awaiting Dirk and Gale were two Morgan mounts, with the short, intelligent heads and short-coupled bodies of the breed. Near them a giant in straw sombrero, torn cotton shirt and trousers, was packing two gray mules with bedrolls and cooking equipment. As he worked, a strange continuous tinkling sound came from him.

Dirk stopped abruptly, staring at the man. A bank of thick leather was buckled about the fellow's neck. Little bells hooked into this collar gave off a constant faint chiming as the man moved his head. In addition, suspended from the collar and hanging on his chest was one of those bells worn by mares that lead pack-mule strings.

The belled giant was no Mexican, but a red-headed American with a face strangely blotched. Part of it was bare with horrible scars, the rest had a short growth of red beard.

"That's only Tonto," laughed Gale, noting that Dirk was staring. "They left out half the brains when they made him. He's ridin' out with us to be our camp flunkey. I like to have him along jist to hear them damn' bells. Bells sure fit him. All the high-muck-a-mucks in the old days used to keep fools with bells on 'em to amuse 'em. That half-wit sure entertains this hacienda."

Gale walked over to seize the strap of the heavy bell on the man's chest, and shook it so that it clattered loudly. At this the two American bronc stompers

stopped their work to laugh while the vaqueros who had been clowning over the English saddles roared. A great joke on the ranch evidently—the red-head, Tonto, with the clouded mind, who wore the big bell and the belled collar. Plainly the butt of the coarse humor of the hacienda people, taunted and teased by young and old.

Bill Dirk stood motionless, staring, while the activity and laughter of the corrals gave way, in his mind, to the pines and spruces of that camp where he had ridden one morning long before and found the burned and blackened bodies of his wife and children. Again he heard the red-headed giant, Rodey, who worshipped the Dirk family, had fallen to his knees and begged Dirk to end him with a bullet. Instead, Bill Dirk had asked only that he might never see the man again. Nor had he until this moment. Small wonder that he stared now, his hands moist, sweat beading his forehead.

"That red-head landed here six or seven years ago," said Gale. "Told us he wore them bells to pay for something terrible he did oncet. Something they couldn't put him in prison for, because he hadn't meant to do it—had done it just because he was too much of a fool to know better. And the dumb lunkhead said he had put on that collar o' bells and that big bell so people would know he was coming and could keep out of his way. He didn't want to hurt anybody else. Try to tie that! Don't it make one hell of a story?"

Dirk's mind slowly came to anchor in the big yard again. The red-head had turned as he worked, enough to catch a glimpse of Dirk. At once he dropped what he was doing and faced about, taking an uncertain step toward the newcomer. The giant's body was shaking while his eyes, a little vacant, were begging as much as eyes could beg for some sign from Dirk who had ordered him out of his life. He was like a whipped dog, ready to wag his tail at the first sign of his master's relenting.

Even that foolish gesture of the bells as a constant reminder of negligence, the years that the man had spent in trying in his childish way to pay penance, could not touch Dirk. Rodey, whom once he had loved and protected as he might have a weak-minded son, was beyond the pale. Dirk could have no more forgiveness for him than for a broken-backed rattler that had killed his wife and boys.

Deliberately Dirk turned away, without a sign of recognition. And slowly, sadly, the red-headed Rodey, alias Tonto, turned back to his work. His big body was still trembling and his hands fumbled clumsily with the pack rope. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

A Fool Points Trail

A FLOCK of children released from the school of the hacienda, all with the straight thick, black brush of hair showing part Indian blood, raced out now to surround the red-head. Their voices rose in shrill-shouted insults. Some of the boys brought over bells from a corral and clattered them in the red-head's ears; others showered him with stones and filth, in the way that children often revert to savagery. Once goaded beyond endurance, Tonto turned on them, which, of course, only redoubled the uproar.

Dirk, standing a little apart, tried to put the scene out of his mind, but could not. Seeing Rodey again renewed the deep pain of unhealed scars, brought back all the old grief which, relieved by the excitement of lawless exploits, had returned to torture him in prison.

Standing there, bleak-faced, he thought that he was like that poor fool with his grotesquely-burned face and thick-ton-

gued talk which was more animal than human. He, too, was a belled man, paying for something that had not been his fault. And to the end of their lives he and Tonto would pay for a trick of a pitiless fate.

Gay voices and laughter sounded at the gate of the big yard as the riding party entered and headed for their mounts rigged with the small flat saddles. There were half a dozen men and women, all dressed in the garb worn on Eastern bridle paths.

"Look at the ladies and gentlemen," sneered Ira Gale. "Canterin' out to some shady place to eat a dainty lunch an' down a few bottles of wine."

Only one member of the party, a girl, had her attention caught by the clamorous children about the red-head, and turned to come toward the man.

She was not large and was so young that she looked almost like a pretty child trying to play grown-up. But her luminous, gray eyes held the understanding of an adult as she walked toward the man with his collar of bells and the mocking crowd of children. She stopped near Ira Gale and asked about the man.

Gale laughed. "Why don't yuh ask him?" he returned. "Shucks, don't git stirred up over it. That collar's a sorta ornament to him. He's mighty proud of it."

"It's like a dog collar, and as if he were a dog," said the girl. "I can't stand to see it."

She went on toward the red-haired packer and at her approach the children stepped quickly back. The red-head looked around in surprise, and at sight of the girl he stopped work. For a moment the jangling bells were still.

"Who put that on you?" she demanded.

Dumbly the giant stared at her, his big mouth opened as if to speak, and then he wagged his head as if bewildered by her question. The bells shook softly with the movement.

"You don't have to wear it if you don't want to," the girl went on. "No one can force you to wear it, understand? Why don't you take it off?"

Tonto's eyes kindled a little at the sympathy in the girl's voice. It was perhaps the first kindness he had met on this ranch. The girl could see that she was dealing with a man whose mind was a little childish, and she spoke to him now coaxingly. "Why don't you take it off?" she urged. "They would leave you alone. Are you afraid, maybe? Here, I'll do it for you."

The bewilderment on the face of the red-haired giant increased as the girl came close to him. He bent his head so that she could reach his neck and stood still while her hands went up to the heavy buckle. There was compassion in her gray eyes and in her voice. Bill Dirk was thinking that she had the gentlest voice he had ever heard. Her fingers struggled with the buckle, but they could not budge the tongue from its hole in the heavy leather.

"Help me," she said, when she failed. "Don't you want to get rid of it? Why, what is the matter?"

For Tonto had stepped away, and now stood looking past the girl, at Bill Dirk. So standing, two tears appeared in his pathetic eyes and rolled down the cheeks of his burned face.

"No, no," he said thickly. "Tonto must wear the bells. Only one man—can take them off Tonto. It does not matter—let the children have their fun with me." Abruptly Tonto turned back to his packing.

"He's crazy, Miss Keith," put in Gale callously. "He simply ain't all there. Don't worry none about him. He don't mind that outfit; he likes the music it makes."

The party of riders, meanwhile, had mounted and was ready to go. An arrogant-looking girl with a petulant mouth called sharply: "Hurry, Julia!" The gray-eyed girl who had come to Tonto turned to go. Dirk guessed that she was a poor relative or perhaps a paid companion.

As they rode out, Tonto quit work to look after them. The children renewed their tormenting. Ignoring them, the red-head continued to stand in a trance, staring after the girl.

Ira Gale, impatient to go, stepped forward to swing a boot against Tonto's backside. "Git to work, yuh damn' half-brain," he growled. "Rattle them bells!"

Ten minutes later, Gale and Dirk were riding out of the yard. After them Tonto on a shaggy mustang led the two gray pack mules. As they shoved their horses into a lope, the tinkling of the red-head's small bells was punctuated by the loud *clunk-clunk* of the big bell on his chest.

THE Hacienda Casas Grandes was a small kingdom, with its carpeted grass valleys and its foothills with brush and browse for winter forage, all cradled beneath towering mountain peaks. On the huge hacienda were vast pine forests, unworked mines of unbelievable richness and streams that could provide water power for whole cities.

Dirk had a good view of it when Gale took him along the route that the stolen Morgans would have to cover. They rode as far as the edge of a desert country where no guide would be needed except the Pole Star. At night they camped, with Tonto cooking for them, always with the inevitable accompaniment of the bells. After his work was done he sat silently, out of earshot of Gale and Dirk who were discussing plans.

The raid, they decided, should be easy. Dirk's men in their guise as trappers had located on the edge of the valley where the Morgans were held by a few Mexican herders. At dusk Dirk would take his men and fall on the horse camp, tie up the herders, and move out with the horses.

The sooner the better, both men agreed, after meeting one of the hacienda employees returning from a visit to the nearest town. He had heard news there of Gil Torres, the bandit. Torres had come within sixty miles of the hacienda, boldly entering a town, butchering the small garrison of Federal soldiers and looting the place.

When Gil took a town, he strung up merchants by their thumbs until they disgorged all their cash, while his men looted each for himself, killing men, treating inhabitants as their animal lusts dictated. When Torres attacked a large ranch, they were likely to use its men as targets, carrying off such women as pleased them, and leaving the buildings a smoking ruin.

A bad one was this *bandido*, Gil Torres, and while he would not dare attack Casas Grandes itself, yet the threat was enough to use in the raid on the horses. The fact that he had come closer would strengthen the supposition that he had stolen the horses.

The three camped a second night at the foot of a ridge overlooking a long valley. They were to separate here the next morning, Dirk to ride to his men and start the raid that night, Gale and Tonto to return to the ranch. Dirk had two or three Mexicans in the outfit and the others could speak Spanish. The herders in the darkness would think that a small force from Torres' troop had attacked them.

Promptly at dawn the three rolled out. Tonto was lighting the fire for breakfast, when he stopped suddenly and pointed. Below them, in the faint light they saw a long line of men stringing down the valley. From their rifles, their tattered imitations of uniforms, their pack mules, it was plainly the expedition of a rebel

force—about a hundred and fifty men. And there was only one such force in the vicinity. That of Gil Torres.

"Heading straight for Casas Grandes," muttered Gale. "They're goin' to jump the place. And they'll take it, too. I never counted on Gil attackin' us. It'll bring five thousand troops in here after Torres, but the damn' fool is pullin' it anyway!"

Gale chuckled grimly. "Maybe he's heard about Dozan's daughter visitin' out here and figures on a kidnaping, with a couple hundred thousand dollars ransom. Luck's playin' our way, Dirk. Those Morgans won't be no more missed than a handful of sand off the seashore. Me, I'm clearin' outa the country. The ranch can't hold off that bunch. Torres' men is fighters. They'll burn the hacienda and maybe carry off a few of the good-lookin' girls and kill most o' the men. I'm ridin' north with you and the Morgans, Bill. Let that damn' hacienda look after itself. I'll have it give out that I been killed down there."

DIRK looked at Gale, for a moment inclined to protest. It was Gale's job to get back to warn the hacienda and take charge of its defense—to try to keep its people from massacre. The man was plainly quitting, but that was on Gale's conscience. It had nothing to do with Bill Dirk.

Since the time he had lost his wife and his children, he had never presumed to judge others. Nor did he care what happened to anyone, least of all himself. Life to him was a merciless passage between birth and death, and for him there was no room in it for love or hope—nothing but the drug of excitement that he got from challenging the law.

"I'd like to see what the Torres outfit of marihuana-smokin' devils do to that hacienda," Gale remarked. "There'll be a fight, but it won't last long. After Torres takes the place, his outfit'll git drunk, an' finish off all the men and have a merry time with the women. Then they'll grab all the horses, tie those high-steppin' Eastern women in saddles, set the place afire, and ride off to the mountains."

A whining sound came from the ground where Tonto still knelt by his pile of sticks, holding his unlighted match. He had been watching the column of Torres' men, paying no heed to Gale's talk.

"We ride, Mr. Gale?" he asked. "Quick! To warn the hacienda!"

"Not by a damn' sight," returned Gale. "Let those folks look after themselves. Ain't you heard what I been sayin? I ain't goin' back."

Tonto's scarred face was working. "But, Mr. Gale," he protested, "think of the women, the children there. We ride quick—get ready for a fight, hold them off."

"Say," said Gale, "what's got into your half-wit head? That outfit never done nothin' but tease yuh an' make life a hell for yuh. Maybe you're worried about that gray-eyed girl, Julia Keith, what tried to unbuckle your collar. I bet that's it," he guffawed. "The only person that ever spoke kind to the poor fool. I bet he's fell in love with her."

Tonto wagged his head, bewildered, unable to believe that Gale was not going to race back with a warning.

"Women, children there," he repeated. "It is the place of a man to look after children and women."

Gale stepped forward, planted his boot in the man's ribs.

"Git breakfast!" he ordered. "That gang is a'most outa sight by now. Stir yourself, hear me?"

Submissively, but still mumbling to himself, Tonto turned to light the fire. Gale rolled a cigarette and passed the sack to Dirk.

Gale and Dirk had left their six-shooters by their beds; their rifles were in their saddle scabbards. They paid no attention to the movements of Tonto as he bustled out, until a hoarse cry made the pair face the red-head, who was covering them with Gale's Winchester.

"You ride," he told them, "both of you —for the hacienda. You belong there, to fight—to protect children and women. That is the place for men."

Gale stared for a moment, and then he gathered himself for a leap.

"Don't do it," Bill Dirk warned him. "Rodey means business, and he was the best rifle shot I ever saw."

"Rodey?" burst out Gale. "Best rifle shot you ever saw? You knew him before?"

"I knew him," said Dirk with a mirthless laugh. "He always was strong on that stuff that a man's business is to protect children and women. I trusted him with my own wife and children many times, and one time he protected them too well. It won't do any good to argue with him, Gale. He's thinkin' of women and children and we've got to go back. And as long as we got to go, the sooner we do it, the closer we'll come to beatin' off Torres."

Tonto moved the gun impatiently. "Hurry!" he ordered. "Saddle up. Quick."

They obeyed, running for their horses and cinching up in a furious haste. Gale was muttering as he worked. "I'll skin him alive," he promised. "I'll slice him up and make him eat himself up, piece by piece."

"If yuh live," said Dirk, grimly, "which ain't at all likely."

Then all three swung into saddles and spurred off. The pack mules were left behind.

Their horses' hoofs drummed along the bottom of the ridge, as they left the pack mules behind and angled into a canyon that was a short cut back to the hacienda. Gale led the way, with Dirk following, and behind them, his bells jangling, came Rodey, alias Tonto.

Gale was cursing as he rode, but Dirk sat tight-lipped, silent, reflecting on the irony that the half-crazy red-head who had been responsible for the death of his wife and baby boys should be forcing them to do their duty—as men.

CHAPTER THREE

The Attack on the Hacienda

WITH the dazzling white walls of the hacienda directly ahead, they topped a ridge and ran into a band of Gale's vaqueros jogging out for roundup. Gale shouted a hoarse order at them to return, and then raced on with Dirk, followed closely by Tonto still carrying the Winchester over his saddle horn. The vaqueros, swinging their horses, thundered along in the dust stirred up by the trio.

Nothing could have been more peaceful than the big hacienda as the riders swept toward it. The outfits of men who were breaking young mules were circling in the big wagons. Just emerging from the gate of the big, walled yard rode the party of Easterners, heading out on another picnicking expedition.

"Git back!" shouted Gale as he rode toward them. "Torres is on his way to jump the *rancho*."

Edith Dozan, whose father owned the hacienda, utterly spoiled as only a rich girl can be spoiled, pulled up her horse. "Are you shouting at us?" she demanded.

"Yeah!" Gale gritted out savagely. "Git this, you white-faced, white-livered tenderfoots. You heard of Gil Torres an' you'll hear plenty from him in the next hour. He's got more men than we got. It's ten to one he'll scatter this million-dollar layout all over the scenery. Now

git back, all of yuh an' hole up and pray, an' if there's any real men in your party, grab guns."

Gale rode on, leaving the Easterners staring after him. The manager didn't care whether they came inside the walls or not, and he had no time to see that they did. Already in the distance, traveling down a shallow canyon, could be seen the dust cloud made by Torres' men.

Gale raced into the wagon yard, in one breath shouting news of the coming attack and issuing wild orders. Someone ran to begin a furious ringing of a huge bell, spreading the alarm to the farthest corners of the half dozen big buildings. In two minutes Gale had succeeded only in throwing the whole hacienda into a mad confusion. Men and women raced here and there without order or purpose. The manager turned helplessly to Bill Dirk.

"A lot of kids," Gale said, disgusted. "I'd sooner have a bunch o' scared rabbits to fight Torres. Damn it, Dirk, you've held off plenty of law posses in your time. I ain't never had any experience in this kind o' fighting. Why don't you take this over an' try to hold off those wolves? Whatever you say, we'll do."

"All right," agreed Dirk instantly. "I'd say to try to hold only two buildings: the main house and the peon quarters. Send all the women and young ones back into the main house. Station half the men on the roofs of the peon quarters. Torres will have to take that building before he can take the main house. And he'll have to work from cover of the stables and wagon yard, so if they drive us out of the workers quarters, we'll be able to fall back to the main house for a last stand scrap there."

"Go ahead," yelled Gale. "I said you was general here, didn't I?"

Hastily Dirk organized the hacienda's men into fighting units. Each of the half dozen American foremen and the two bronc busters from above the line were to command ten men.

As defense against bandit raids, rifles and dozens of rounds of cartridges for them were kept locked in a storeroom. While Gale hunted frantically for a key to this, Dirk shot off the lock of the door, and the foreman hurriedly issued weapons and ammunition. All the buildings had four-foot adobe parapets rising above the flat roofs which made, with the high blank outside walls, a separate fort of each structure.

The old and sick, the wives and the children, were herded into the main building which contained on one court the rooms of the owner of the hacienda, and about an adjoining one, the quarters of the American employees.

BY the time that Torres' men rode within range, rifle barrels lay atop the parapets of the two buildings which Dirk had elected to defend. Torres was coming with a rush, his horses at a gallop. Gil and his men had a reputation for reckless courage; they were like most Mexicans, fatalists to the core: the time, they believed, was already set when they were to die—and nothing could hurry or delay it.

A motley troop, the officers and a few privates in uniforms, the rest in cheap cotton jeans with bits of gaudy finery—sashes, silver-banded sombreros, miscellaneous loot. They splashed through the shallow creek behind the wagon yard, and climbed the slope, fanning out as they came, intending evidently to surround the whole hacienda, and take it in one rush.

Dirk passed the word then to open fire. The range was still a little long for most of the rifles, but some of the foremen and half a dozen of the vaqueros flung accurate shots into the leaders of the racing horsemen. Three saddles were emptied at the first burst of fire and four horses

went down, sending their riders rolling over their heads.

That determined firing was a shock to Gil Torres, who had been counting on an easy victory at Casas Grandes. At his order, men swung their horses toward the sloping tile-roofed stables and wagon yard which apparently were without defenders.

Torres' men returned the fire, but without much effect since they were shooting from the backs of galloping horses. Meanwhile the guns from the hacienda peppered away steadily at them. More saddles emptied, riders falling like loosely sacks of meal. More horses went down.

As Torres' column swung behind the walls enclosing horse corrals and wagon yard, a voice spoke behind Dirk and Gale. Edith Dozan had climbed to the roof.

"This is madness," she said angrily. "What fool gave orders to fire at those men? They wouldn't hurt us. They probably only want a meal and a few horses. As soon as I tell them who I am and threaten to send back word to my father, they won't dare to touch this property."

"Sure," said Gale sarcastically, "Gil Torres, he'll stop as soon as you tell him who you are. He knows already, little one; that's why he's here. And the word that will go back to your father will be a note from Gil askin' for some money wrapped around one of your pink ears or mebbe one of your dainty fingers. Now get the hell back out of this and shut your trap, and if any of those men in your party know which is the hind end of a rifle, send 'em out."

The girl flounced away, and the battle went on. Torres' men had dismounted and part of them had swarmed to the sloping roofs of the stables, where lying behind the peak, they opened a hot fire. Others were firing over the top of the wall of the wagon yard. For a few minutes there was a steady give and take of shots.

There were expert riflemen in the Torres outfit, and three of the hacienda vaqueros who exposed heads too recklessly fell with bullets placed neatly through their skulls. Others suffered smashed shoulders; two got slugs through their chests. Dirk ordered these men taken back to the headquarters building to have their wounds looked after.

Torres' rifles slackened fire and finally became silent. The guns of the hacienda defenders ceased. Silence held for a few moments over the buildings and yards and the slope to the creek where scattered bodies of horses and men lay, as if the giant hand of death had carelessly strewn them there.

Above the plank gate of the wagon yard a white cloth at the end of a rifle barrel was waved. The gate opened and a rider emerged, a gaudy young officer, in a sky-blue uniform decorated with much silver and gold. Making his horse to curvet and prance, he rode leisurely toward the wall of the building which housed the Mexican workers.

Ira Gale talked to him. Torres, said the young officer, demanded the surrender of the place, immediately. If the demand was refused, Torres promised to slaughter every man in the hacienda, and to set fire to all the buildings. All that Torres had wanted originally was food for his men and his horses. He was much angered at the reception given him.

"If that's all you got to say, prance your horse on back," said Gale.

The officer shrugged his shoulders and returned, jauntily throwing a kiss intended for the unseen señoritas in the establishment. He was almost at the gate when two Torres rifles broke out from the stable roofs. One of the hacienda blacksmiths who had been leaning on the parapet, sleepily pillowing his head on his arms, slumped down. In retaliation, Tonto's

rifle crashed at once and the dandified officer fell forward clutching at his horse's mane. As the horse ran through the gate the man rolled to the ground. Torres' men had to kick the body out of the way to close the entrance.

THE rifles at once boomed out again and the battle was on.

"We're in for it," Gale said hopelessly. "That Torres is jist stubborn enough to keep on here no matter how many men he loses. We ain't got a chance."

Dirk nodded. They were in for it. Soon there would come a direct attack, for Torres depended on speed, on striking fast, and retreating to his mountain hide-outs before pursuit could reach him. He could not afford to wait even for night; two or three outfits of Federal troops were hunting for him.

The rifles at the stable and wagon yard died down, only to start up afresh, sending a hail of shots, plainly to cover an open attack. The gate of walled corral, directly opposite the building where Dirk waited with the main part of his force, opened. There appeared first a dozen riflemen followed by a second dozen men carrying a long heavy timber. Running swiftly, they were half way across the open space before Dirk's riflemen on that side could get into action.

When their rifles broke out, the Mexicans were firing wildly, pumping shots in their excitement over the heads of the running men and into the ground. Meanwhile Torres guns from the stable roofs were picking targets unerringly. As Dirk rushed reinforcements to the threatened side, there came a crash at the big plank gate below. The first shock of the ram all but smashed in the gate. Another thud and there was enough space for a man to enter. A third blow of the ram sent the gate crashing. Following the first party, Gil sent another group racing toward the breach in the high walls.

There was no stopping them. Dirk, with a silent curse at Ira Gale for his carelessness in not reinforcing the gate to withstand such assaults, ordered a retreat. They could only fall back now to the headquarters building, for a final stand. Gale began herding them over the roofs to drop to the ground outside the wall and race to cover. Dirk took four of the Americans and followed by Tonto, dropped into the courtyard to cover the retreat, holding back the advance guard of Torres' men until Gale had his men safe.

For a few moments across the big open yard guns crashed like mad, trading wild flurries of shots. Slowly Dirk's little party fell back through a narrow passageway which twisted between peon quarters and led to the gate through which they would retreat.

Shots pitted the walls on either side as Torres' men pressed close. As they fell back, one of the foremen collapsed by Dirk's side, with a bullet in his forehead. Dirk was aware that Gale, having sent the Mexicans on to safety, had returned to help the Americans.

Ira Gale had a peculiar code. He would have abandoned the hacienda to its fate, but once he was in the fight, he was taking equal chances along with the other Americans.

The ranch manager was cursing as he pumped shots, and then abruptly stopping the flow of epithets, Gale staggered back.

Dirk put out an arm to support him. "No use," gasped Gale. "They got me. Damn that Tonto. We could of been ridin' north with the Morgans. Kill the red-head fool for me, will yuh, Bill? Damn him! Damn everything! Them Morgans —I'll never cash in on them. Let me down, Dirk. It hurts too much. Them Morgans—" A spasm of pain choked

off the words. "Them Morgans—all yours, Bill. Not that yuh got any chance to cash in on 'em."

The manager's body jerked convulsively and Dirk let Gale slide to the ground. The man was plainly dead, but for a moment Dirk stood over the manager, emptying his gun, holding back the yelling horde of men that had raced across the court yard and into the alley-like passage.

"Come on, Dirk," yelled one of the foremen, "they'll cut us off."

Dirk turned to follow the others, bringing up the rear of the men racing in a straggling line toward the haven of the big headquarters building. Bells chimed in his ear and the clanking of Tonto's big bell: Tonto was racing a little behind him, stuffing cartridges into his rifle as he pounded along.

A slug from one of the roofs sent a lancing pain along Dirk's thigh. At the same instant a second bullet struck glancingly along his head. He went down to his knees, and while trying to struggle to his feet, he suddenly felt himself being lifted.

ABOVE him was the chiming of small bells that identified Tonto. The giant was carrying him as one carries a heavy child, held in front of him with both arms. As he ran on, bullets whistled about the pair.

"I can make it," Dirk protested, but the giant paid no heed. Once he stumbled and almost fell, and then they were within the headquarters building, in the small courtyard closed in on four sides by offices and rooms of the manager and foreman. The big gate was clanged shut behind them. Men hastened to barricade it, using furniture from the offices and rooms, sacks of cement, anything that had weight.

Dirk stood weakly on his feet, then fell, and struggled to rise again, shouting to Tonto that he was all right. Tonto, seeing that he was able to take care of himself, rushed toward the ladder to join the fighters.

The rifles were hammering in a deafening thunder out there under the blue sky, while Torres prepared for a final rush.

Brushing away the enveloping fog, Dirk became aware suddenly that the little gray-eyed girl, who had wanted to take the collar from Tonto's neck, was standing before him, saying something that he couldn't hear because of the confusion. Men were running past, shouting. Women with babies in their arms and with children clinging to their skirts, were grouped in doorways, uttering frightened cries, some openly weeping. Two rooms had been turned into a hospital for the wounded, under the charge, Dirk realized, of this same girl, Julia Keith. She might have looked like a child, but she was as capable as ten women of Edith Dozan's sort.

"Let me bandage you up," she repeated, stooping over him and starting to apply some gauze to his wound. His hair was sticky with blood and a brown splotch had appeared on his trousers leg.

"They're nothing," returned Dirk, motioning her away and getting up. "Nicks. I'll tend to them later." He started after Rodey, toward the roof, but the girl came close.

"You're the man they call Bill Dirk, aren't you? The man Gale put in charge. You've got to keep out those beasts, no matter what it costs. Not for our sakes, but for those poor Mexicans. They're depending on us, and we're depending on you, Bill Dirk."

"I'll try," mumbled Dirk, but there was a promise that went far deeper than the words. Before, he had not cared much whether Torres took Casas Grandes or not.

Now there suddenly came to Bill Dirk a stir of something long dead—the capac-

ity to feel. Desperately he wanted to save this hacienda from capture. Not so much for the women trembling in the doorways as for this one girl who had wanted to take the collar off that poor fool of a Tonto. A woman, with all that the word means in its highest sense; such a woman as he had worshipped and who had been the mother of his children. It was as if his dead wife was speaking through this girl, asking him not to save her, but others —the brown-faced women.

Dirk straightened. "They'll be kept out," he said.

Like a clarion call came the savage crash of rifles, and a fresh burst of yells indicating some fresh activity of Torres.

Painfully Dirk hobbled up the ladder that led to the roofs, and grabbed the Winchester from a man who plainly did not know how to use it. He had to do the impossible here: keep Torres back. Dirk had made a promise to a girl, and Bill Dirk, outlaw, ex-convict, would keep his word!

CHAPTER FOUR

The Return of Bill Dirk

ONE savage rush and it would all be over. Half the American foremen on the ranch were already wounded or killed. The Mexican workers of the hacienda, most of whom had never even owned a gun, couldn't hope to hold back Gil Torres' renegade rabble. For years those Torres soldier-bandits had made a business of fighting; all were crack shots and possessed of a reckless courage.

On the roof, Dirk was glancing about him. Tonto, disregarding bullets, was leaning his big body half way over the parapet. Rifles were answering Torres' guns bullet for bullet, but Casas Grandes employees were firing like children, merely pumping shots to be shooting. Most of them realized that they were already beaten and a few were slipping away to try to escape.

A demon came into Bill Dirk. He had been a fighter all his life, and always he had lost. First his big ranch, then his family, and then the prison. Once more he would challenge the fate that had brought him three disasters. He had a few seconds left before the attack. At once he shouted to the men to cease firing, to load their rifles and hold them ready.

And then on the dirt roof, Bill Dirk talked to them in Spanish. And as he talked, his own cool courage was transferred to the men who listened.

They could stop Torres, Dirk told them. But not by a wild pumping of shots when the rush came. Instead they would have to slow down, carefully find a target for each bullet before they pulled a trigger. When the attack started, they should step boldly to the parapet, use it for a rifle rest, and find a running man in their gunsights. They were to fire only when Dirk gave the word. Torres was counting on their panic and excitement to make at least nine-tenths of their shots miss. They would have to outfox Torres; show him that men of the Casas Grandes were *bravos* who could be as cool and deadly in battle as his own crew.

A murmur ran along the men on the roof. Bill Dirk had the quality of leadership; he had commanded bronc men in his outlaw crew, maintaining a strict discipline among them, leading them against hopeless odds.

The men nodded now as Dirk finished; clamped their teeth, and waited. Let Torres yell; let him charge! The men of Casas Grandes would meet that attack with deliberation, would fire slowly, shoot only when Dirk gave the command.

A burst of shouting welled from the building that they had just quitted, where

Torres had gathered all of his men except the sharpshooters who still lay on the tile roofs of the stables. Those riflemen, said Dirk, were not to be feared; the sun was in their eyes, and the range was overly long.

The first wave of men emerged from the gate and ran forward confidently, cloaking a little group carrying the timber to use as ram. As they came, Torres' riders were yelling at the top of their voices and shooting wildly, to shake the men who crowded the roof-tops of the white-walled building. Leading Torres' men were three officers, carrying pistols.

Sight of this warlike outfit was enough to terrify the peacefully-inclined peons of the hacienda, but Dirk's voice held them steady. Not a rifle spoke, not a yell came from them during the first of that rush. In dead silence they waited, lining up men, until when Dirk gave the word, the guns crashed out in a deafening bellow of sound.

Two of the officers in the lead were the first to fall. Behind them men staggered, stumbled, went down. The rush wavered a little, shaken by that withering blast, and then the others pushed on, yelling more fiercely. On the roof-top, rifles ejected empty cartridges, and men crouched again for a deliberate aim. Three men along the wall staggered back, hit by shots from the sharpshooters, but Dirk, the remaining American foremen and Tonto, standing full height, were enough example to hold the others at their places.

By now Torres' men, a dusty, savage-looking crew, had come within fifty yards. Again, in a volley, that long row of rifles on the roof parapet belched out almost as one. And this time Torres' men went down in appalling numbers.

MEN halted, dropping their guns to clutch their bellies. Men slumped down as if struck by a great club. Men ran on a few steps, and went down, kicking, their blood crimsoning the dust at the very foot of the big gate. Those who had been carrying the ramming timber fell almost to a man, and as the heavy log went down it imprisoned its bearers beneath it. Death ran all along the mass of running men, touching shoulders, here, there. Before that wholesale blow, the whole scattered group of advancing men came to a halt, realizing that the distance to that long white wall would probably be, for them, the whole of eternity.

Pivoting, they began to race back in a wild panic-stricken flight, and behind them Dirk's voice came, ordering another round of shots. All the way back to the gate, the rifles took their toll, shooting at the easy targets of the backs.

Then Dirk glanced about the roof. Men lay on it, but only a few; some writhing and groaning, others trying to get up to fire one last shot. Compared with them the ground in front of the wall looked like a floor in a slaughter house.

An outburst of yelling from Torres' men brought back Dirk to the possibility of a second charge, but something else was causing the yelling. South of the hacienda, floating lazily in the clear air was a long, yellow cloud of dust, a snaky string that denoted many riders.

"Federals coming!" shouted one of the American bronc stompers. And then in astonishment, as if he could not yet believe it, "We won," he went on. "By gosh, we won!"

Dirk nodded, and looked about him, realizing that something was missing here—the chiming of Tonto's bells. The red-headed giant lay sprawled on his back, among the green weeds that had taken root in the dirt roof.

He was looking up at Dirk, and in his eyes, clouded already by approaching death was an unspoken pleading.

Dirk crossed to the man and knelt by

the giant's side. "Rodey," he muttered, and at the old name the red-haired man's hand came up. Dirk gripped it gently. Blood was spreading in a great dark blot over Tonto's shirt, under the big bell that the man wore.

Then, "Rodey," repeated Dirk hoarsely, and a dam burst within him, one which had formed the morning when he had found his family dead, the dam that had long been choking up all normal human tides in him.

"Bill," came from Tonto with a harsh whistling breath. "That night—I did—the best I could."

Dirk nodded. "I know, Rodey. I didn't realize it then. Losing them meant almost as much to you as it did to me. I didn't think of it that way. Rodey, I ought to of been hung for what I did to you."

Someone was on the other side of Tonto, leaning down to cut away with swift, efficient fingers the blood-soaked shirt over the big chest. The clatter of the hoofs of Torres' men came faintly, splashing across the creek, and beating away with a thudding rumble that grew fainter and fainter. Voices welled from the hacienda, women and children started talking suddenly, a few grief-stricken women sobbing.

"Isn't there some hope for him?" demanded Dirk, although he knew as well as the girl that there was none. The girl made no answer. She was looking down at the red-haired man whose eyes were veiling over.

Tonto was trying to say something, to deliver some message but Dirk could not make it out. But the girl divined it.

"The collar, Bill Dirk," she said. "He wants you to take it off him. He said the other day that there was only one man who could take it off. That man is you. Whatever he'd done, he's worn it long enough, Bill Dirk."

Dirk's hands fumbled at the thick leather strap, while the doglike eyes of Tonto looked into his face. Tonto had worn it long enough, God knows. This man had saved a haciende from slaughter and plunder, had saved Bill Dirk from death.

The collar slipped off and dropped with a final tinkle of the bells on the dirt roof. By its side, Dirk laid the big bell. Then his arm went around the red-head's shoulders, lifted him a little.

"Rodey," he said, "I've taken off your collar. And you've taken off mine, too. We both wore them too long."

Rodey nodded a little. From him came a faint murmur. "Too—long. I hoped—that some day you—you—"

BACK in the happy days when Rodey had been made a hand on Bill Dirk's big ranch, some of the cowboys said that Rodey knew more than he let on; that he often intentionally acted the fool. Perhaps that explained the deep feeling of which the man was capable. His mind was clouded, but his spirit certainly was not. Dirk had never known Rodey to do one selfish thing in his life.

The man's eyes closed; the big chest heaved no more in its gasping breaths. Rodey lay quietly with a ghostlike smile illuminating his scarred face.

The girl was weeping quietly, and Bill Dirk kneeling by the dead man, who had paid for all his carelessness by years of penance, felt like weeping, too. He had not wept back there when he had ridden into the yard before the burned cabin. Nor had he wept at the mounds of the three graves that covered his loved ones. Beneath those mounds he believed had been buried a Bill Dirk who could laugh and even cry, who could feel as other people did. Now that buried man had come alive. This dead man and the girl opposite had built a bridge to take him back

again across the years to the old Bill Dirk.

He looked steadily at the girl, and her eyes met his squarely. "I've been an outlaw," he said. "I've served time. I was down here to steal a bunch of horses, and if not for Tonto making me come back I would never have been here to help fight off Torres."

"Whatever you have been, Bill Dirk," the girl said, "or whatever you've done, you are still alive. And there's a place somewhere for you to make a fresh start. I'm secretary to the owner of this ranch. He sent me out here with his daughter's party to investigate the way things have been conducted here and to make recommendations. The chief one I'm going to make is that you be given Ira Gale's job as manager."

"A fresh start," said Bill Dirk. "Do you think you can trust me?"

"I can trust you," she returned. "But to see that there are no slip-ups, I'm going to stay here a while—to watch you."

Bill Dirk had not said a dozen sentences to this girl. It did not matter. She and Rodey had made him a man again, with a man's capacity for living—for grief and joy. A man who again had something worthwhile to fight for. His soul.

THE END

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by JOHN C. COLOHAN

(Author of "Brand of the Damned," etc.)

They called Dave Leonard a madman and a fool when he rode alone against the Anvil's hireling killers. Yet there are times when such madness may be sheer blood-red courage, and Death itself may stay its hand to watch one brave man ride to gunsmoke glory!

SAM KETTLEMAN, on the witness stand, lifted a trembling hand and fumbled uncertainly with the frayed ends of his ragged, sandy moustache. A forlorn little man in overalls, Sam Kettleman let his frightened eyes flicker over the crowded, smoke-filled courtroom. Then, patiently, County Attorney Darwin repeated his question once again.

"Take your time, Sam," he said gently. "Last night Clay Webber was shot in front of the Elko barn. You were working inside the barn; you seem to have been the only witness to the shooting. It has been told to me that you stated that Ed Ganns was the man who fired the shot. I ask you now if you made that statement?"

In three sentences the county attorney had summed up all that was known of the affair. Young Clay Webber, half owner of the little Tumbling T spread in Buffalo Basin, had been walking down Marble City's main street the night before, when, in front of the Elko barn, a man had stepped before him from the shadows. There had been, apparently, a brief exchange of words; there had been a single shot; the young cowman had dropped with a bullet through his chest. His assailant had disappeared in the shadows of the alley. Young Webber had been unarmed at the time of the attack. Unconscious since, he was lying now at the point of death.

Dave Leonard, partner of the wounded man, sat still and quiet with his lips set in a thin, harsh line, with an ugly knot of muscle showing at the angle of his jaw. As little Sam Kettleman hesitated in his testimony, the big Tumbling T man sli

forward in his seat. But a hand fell across his arm.

"Steady, son," a low voice counselled him. It was the voice of Peaceful Jordan, gentleman, scholar, and editor of the *Marble County Peacemaker,* the county's only newspaper. "Sam's not a fighting man. He's in a tough spot now."

Dave Leonard settled back in his seat. There was truth in the words of Peaceful Jordan. This wasn't an easy spot for Sam Kettleman, the little hostler who had looked out of the gloom of a livery stable in time to see a man shot down, and then had spoken out of turn.

Sprawled back in a chair, Ed Ganns watched the witness with mocking, sardonic smile. Sunlight slanting through a long window showed the jagged line of the old knife scar on Ganns' right cheek. A gunman, Ganns, and a killer by repute, and he was unworried now. In a chair beside him sat Black Jack Wygal, black-bearded, arrogant owner of the Anvil brand, and the man who gave Ganns his orders. Behind Wygal, standing, with his broken left arm cradled in a sling, was Buck Stacey, Anvil foreman, and others of Black Wygal's men were scattered about the room.

A tough outfit, the Anvil. Men who bothered Black Wygal didn't prosper. Men who got in his way went broke, or quit the country in haste, or sometimes died suddenly and unpleasantly. Too late, perhaps, Sam Kettleman had recalled this fate. . . .

Again, gently, the attorney repeated his question. "Did you state that Ganns shot Webber, Sam?"

Sam Kettleman gulped. "I said—I said—he looked something like Ganns—"

Lots of men in Marble county were afraid of Black Wygal and his crew. The white-haired county attorney was not one of them. His voice snapped: "Was it Ganns?"

AGAIN the little hostler's stricken gaze moved over that crowded room, stopped for an instant on Sheriff Frawley, standing with big shoulders braced against the wall. But the big sheriff's face was aloof, uninterested; it offered neither aid nor counsel. Sam Kettleman's eyes moved on, rested momentarily on Dave Leonard, then jerked away before the hard scorn on the puncher's face.

"I—I don't think it was Ganns," Sam Kettleman faltered. "I—I've been thinkin' it over some, and—and I don't figger it was Ed. This gent was taller—not so heavy, mebbe—"

Wearily the county attorney waved his hands. "That's all," he said.

It was over. The case against Ed Ganns had collapsed, lacking evidence; there would be no trial. Within the packed courtroom was a shuffle of movement.

Then a voice cut through—a harsh voice, thick with fury: "It isn't all!"

Dave Leonard was swinging to his feet. White-faced, furious, the big cowboy was striding across the floor, shaking off the hand of Peaceful Jordan as he advanced. He caught Ed Ganns still sprawled back in his chair, stood over the Anvil gunman.

"It's not all, Ganns," Dave Leonard said. His voice had lowered, but in that silent room it carried to the farthest walls. "Mebbe Clay will live. If he doesn't, I'm prayin' he'll live long enough to put a name to the polecat who shot him down. I'm gunning for that gent, Ganns. I tell you now that I figger you're the man!"

Even then, with hot anger prodding him on, Dave Leonard knew that he was making a mistake. The scarred-faced Ganns was only a gunman under orders, only a puppet who moved when Black Wygal jerked the strings. If Clay Webber died, even though Ganns might be the man who had sent the death slug on its way, it would still be Black Wygal who had killed his partner. But Wygal was in the clear. . . .

Ganns twisted sidewise in his seat. "The sheriff's got my gun," he said. "Now that the song-and-dance is over, I reckon he'll give it back. I tell yuh what yuh do, Leonard. Yuh drive right up anytime an' turn yore wolf loose. I'll be expecting yuh."

Then half a dozen men were between Dave Leonard and the Anvil man—the sheriff, the county attorney, bystanders anxious to avert a gun-play. Peaceful Jordan was tugging at Dave's arm.

"That's enough damn foolishness for one time, Dave." The little newspaperman's closely trimmed Van Dyke beard bristled. "Let's get out of here."

Over the heads of smaller men Dave could see Black Wygal towering hugely; he met the bearded man's eyes and their glances locked. Dave Leonard turned away, shouldered a path through the staring crowd. Peaceful Jordan trailed in his wake. They hit the wooden sidewalks, covered a block in silence.

The newspaperman spoke musingly. "That wasn't very smart, Dave."

"No," said Leonard grimly. "I'm not smart."

"You're smart enough," said Peaceful Jordan. "You're smart enough to know you can't buck the Anvil single-handed. You're one man. Black Wygal's got the toughest outfit in this end of the state. You leave this business to the law."

Law! The big Tumbling T man grinned mirthlessly. A year ago Black Wygal, branching out, had decided he needed the water of the Tumbling T for his ever-growing herds. He had made the partners an offer which they had scornfully refused. Then, deliberately, ruthlessly, the bearded Anvil owner had set out to drive the two men from the range. Fences had been torn out, feed had been destroyed, Tumbling T cattle had been drifted off, or shot down and left to rot. One outrage had followed another. Now Clay Webber was dying—shot down by an unknown hand. . . .

"For a newspaperman, you're behind the times, Peaceful," Dave Leonard said. "There's no law in this county—never has been none since I came here. One of these days you folks are goin' to wake up to find Black Wygal's taken over the county. The sheriff's afraid of him—you could see that today in court. The law can't touch him. He's got this whole damn country treed."

"Wygal will be cut down—mark my word for that," said Peaceful sadly. "But it's a job for the law, and no man has the right to take the law in his hands."

They had reached the long, ramshackle building which housed the *Marble County Peacemaker*. A girl waited in the doorway, a slender, dark-haired girl in a soiled apron, with a smudge of printer's ink showing across her upward-tilted nose. She held the door wide.

"What happened?" she wanted to know.

"They turned him loose," Dave Leonard said flatly.

SHE stared, eyes incredulous. Her name was Wilma Gayle, but Marble City had shortened the first part of the name to Bill. She was an orphan who, by some vague process of adoption, had become the niece of Peaceful Jordan, and with it his right-hand man in the conduct of the *Peacemaker*. Now she frowned thoughtfully. "I thought Sam Kettleman saw the shooting—"

"He did," said the Tumbling T man wearily. "He saw the light, likewise. Black Wygal lined his outfit up behind Ganns in the court, and Sam Kettleman changed his mind. So Ganns goes free."

"And Dave went loco and challenged the Anvil," said Peaceful Jordan.

Her blue eyes widened. "Dave! You didn't!"

He studied her troubled face. "Not pre-

cisely," he said gravely. "I told Ganns I aimed to look up the gent who shot Clay."

"They'll kill you, Dave. You can't fight them. Not alone—"

"Somebody's got to fight them, Bill."

She moved closer to him. "Always fighting!" she whispered. "Why don't you put an end to it, Dave? I know it's wrong—but why don't you let him have the Tumbling T?"

He stared at her, his lean face hardening. "You don't mean that, Bill."

"I do! I do!" she cried out. "You can't beat Wygal, Dave. He's got too much money—too many gunmen. He's broke you already. Clay's shot. And you—you'll be the next!" She laid a slim hand on his arm. "Dave, you asked me a question once—"

"I know," he said tonelessly. Not so long ago this slender girl with the tilted, ink-smudged nose had been tangled in every plan he made. That was gone; he couldn't ask any girl to share the chances which lay before him now. "I reckon we'll have to forget that, Bill."

She stood still for an instant, studying him out of grave eyes; then, without a word, she turned back to the office. He wanted to call her, wanted to follow and take her in his arms; instead, he spun on his heel.

Peaceful Jordan's drawling voice caught him as he started through the door. The old newspaperman was still standing in the hallway. "This is press day, son," said Peaceful Jordan. "I got a sight of papers to grind out yet, but I'd like a talk with you before you jump clear off the reservation. If you could drop around tonight, after supper—"

Dave Leonard nodded. "I'll be here."

It was beginning to rain as he crossed the street to the hotel. He mounted the stairs wearily, moved down a long corridor, knocked upon a door. Ma Pearson, proprietor of the hotel and the best nurse in the county, opened the door. Dave Leonard lowered his voice.

"Is there—any change?"

She shook her head. "He's still unconscious, Dave. The doctor was just here. Would you like to see him?"

But he shook his head, thinking of Clay Webber lying still and unconscious—Clay Webber, who had been so full of the joy of life. . . .

"No. I'll be in my room. Let me know if there's any change."

THAT evening the rain fell in sheets. At nine o'clock there had been no further news from the sick-room, and so, leaving word where he might be found, Dave Leonard ploughed across the muddy street to the office of the *Peacemaker*. Peaceful Jordan had his living quarters in the back part of the building, but now there was a light in the office and another in the long press-room. Newly printed papers, still damp, were piled high in the office awaiting distribution in the morning.

He picked up a paper, glanced at the front page idly. The shooting of Clay Webber had drawn headlines. There was another story, dealing with the robbery of the bank at Little Bend five days before and this he read, although he was already familiar with the details of the robbery.

Four men, masked, had dropped down on the town of Little Bend just at noon. Working with a swift and deadly efficiency, they had shot the bank cashier dead, looted the vaults, and made their getaway within fifteen minutes in a hail of lead. Below the story of the robbery was a boxed-in column with a big *Reward* plastered across the top:

REWARD

The Board of County Commissioners of Marble County hereby authorizes a reward of one thousand dollars for the arrest and

conviction of each of the four masked bandits who participated in the robbery of the Little Bend Stockman's Bank. These men killed the cashier of the bank and escaped with $18,000 in gold and currency. One of the bandits is believed to have been wounded. Communicate all information to Sheriff L. C. Frawley, Marble City, Colo.

Peaceful Jordan came into the office. Dave Leonard slid the paper across the desk. "There's your law, Peaceful," he said grimly. "One bank robbery, one man dead, one dying—that's one week in Marble county. You talk about law!"

"Sit down, son," said Peaceful. "I want a talk with you."

The old newspaperman moved around the counter, dropped into a swivel chair. The light from the swinging lamp overhead bathed his sparse frame, gleamed on the square steel rims of his spectacles, softened the grey of his closely-trimmed beard. The grime and ink of his calling had stained his hands beyond repair, but otherwise Peaceful Jordan was cat-like in his neatness. He clasped fingers across his chest.

"Things look sorta bad right now, Dave," he said slowly. "I grant you that. And I tell you again that no man ever helped himself by carrying his troubles past the law. I've seen men with a grudge before who set out to balance the books with a Colt. And I've seen them in the end driving down the trail before a posse, or plugged full of holes, or swinging from a gallow's tree. No man can beat the law, Dave. I've watched it tried too many times. I mind the Hatchet Valley war. . . ."

And from his chair Dave Leonard lifted his head and glanced at Peaceful oddly. Fifteen years ago, in another state, the last shot of the Hatchet Valley war had been fired, but it was passing strange that Peaceful Jordan should have picked that bloody chapter out of the story of the West to illustrate a lecture. For, ever since he'd been a button, the Hatchet Valley war had been to Dave Leonard an old, familiar tale. . . .

His father had been killed when Dave was a boy of eight. Two years later the mother had followed after, but, in those two years, many times Dave Leonard had heard the story of his father's death. . . .

There was that night when a hard-driven gun-fighter called Salt River Sloane, fleeing from enemies, had pulled up wounded before Clint Leonard's door, and his father, bound by some old obligation of friendship, had taken the injured gunman in and shielded him overnight. Three months later Clint Leonard had been killed from ambush. Always afterward, his heart-broken widow had maintained that he had been killed because of the night when he had taken in Salt River Sloane. . . .

"I saw the Hatchet Valley war," old Peaceful Jordan was saying. His voice was soft; his eyes, behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, were lost in the past. "I saw the beginning of it, and the end. It was something a man wouldn't soon forget. I knew them all—Lige Bartlett, the two McHenry boys, all of them. It was trouble over range rights, but they couldn't wait for the law. They had to settle it with guns. Lige Bartlett killed George McHenry in front of the Maverick saloon. That was the start. Twenty men were dead before it ended—Lige Bartlett and Bill McHenry with the rest. And twenty more might better have been dead, for they were outlaws, killers, men turned bad forever. Ted Hammer was killed in Oklahoma City. Red Sloss was lynched. Jess Slagle turned bank robber, built up an outlaw crew. All of them had been decent cow-punchers before that day when Lige Bartlett turned to a gun to settle a private quarrel."

DAVE LEONARD stirred in his chair. Outside, the rain beat steadily on the roof. From far off came the sound of

pounding hoofs as a horse galloped into town. The sounds came level with the newspaper office, passed on. Dave rolled a cigarette, sent blue smoke swirling ceilingward.

"In that war was a gent called Salt River Sloane," he said slowly. "Would it be that you knew him?"

"I knew him well," said Peaceful Jordan.

"Tough customer, I reckon?"

Peaceful Jordan was tamping tobacco in his pipe. "Salt River Sloane killed three men in the Hatchet Valley war," he said. "They made an outlaw of him, finally. If I remember rightly, at one time there was ten thousand dollars in blood money on his head. Still, looking back, I can't say that I ever thought Salt River Sloane was bad." Out of tobacco smoke he peered at the lean-faced puncher. "What made you ask that question, son?"

"My dad gave Sloane a lift one time," said Dave. "He was killed afterward—dry-gulched. My mother always said it was because he'd helped Sloane that time."

"Your dad?"

"He owned a ranch at Swiftwater during the Hatchet Valley war," said Dave. "Might be you knew him?"

"Lord love you!" Peaceful Jordan straightened abruptly in his seat. "Was Clint Leonard your dad? Funny—the name was the same, and yet I never thought—" he shook his head wonderingly. "I knew Clint well. Never was a whiter man."

He sat still, staring at the darkness of the rain-streaked window, and it was plain that his thoughts had strayed back across the years. He lifted his head at last.

"It shows what I'm trying to say," he said at last. "No man wins when he goes beyond the law. Mebbe, Dave, yuh figger I'm speaking out of turn. That's a newspaperman's privilege. Besides, I'm the only one Bill's got to turn to, and I've got an idea how things stand between you two. I know if you turn to guns to settle your quarrel with the Anvil you'll end up full of lead. I wouldn't like to see that, Dave. You can't go up against the Anvil—not alone."

Dave stirred in his chair. "What would you have me do?" he demanded. "Sell out, like Bill suggested? Or just lay down and roll over every time Black Wygal gave the word?"

Peaceful Jordan shook his head. "Don't you know, son, that Black Wygal would like nothing better than to have you shoot it out with Ganns. It would give him the chance he's waiting for. If Ganns didn't get you, another would. Don't you know that, boy?"

Outside, a man was hurrying down the wooden sidewalk, boot heels clicking. Dave Leonard's face was grim. "Sure I know it," he said. "It's something I can't help. I made a stand in court today, and I'll play the cards that way."

A hand fumbled the knob of the office door. A man came in, his yellow slicker gleaming in the lamplight. His face was strained and white beneath a soggy Stetson; his shoulders sagged wearily. It was Bud Cowan, youthful puncher of the Tumbling T, left behind to care for the outfit while Dave Leonard stayed in town.

"Ma Pearson said I'd find yuh here," he said. Dave Leonard noted that his hand was covered with blood. "Hell done broke loose tonight, Dave," he said.

"What happened, Bud?"

"They raided us. Half a dozen gents, just after dark. Reckon they knew yuh was in town. They killed my horse, and I drew a slug through the arm. They torn out the drift fence at Rimrock, and they hazed the stuff over the rim. Twenty-thirty head. All killed, I reckon."

Dave Leonard found papers and tobacco, and deliberately rolled a cigarette. He looked at Peaceful Jordan. "Here's

something else now, Peaceful," he said. "You got any advice to cover this specific situation? Do you figger mebbe I better have Bud hunt those gents up and apologize?"

The wounded puncher broke into sputtering speech. "Advice! Hell, I'll deal yuh out some advice, Dave. Let's you and me hunt up Black Wygal. When we find him, let's salt him down with lead, permanent. That's the only way to end this business!"

Leonard looked at him thoughtfully. "You go down and get Doc Claggett to fix that arm," he said. "Then you go to bed. We'll figger this thing in the morning."

"I tell yuh, Dave—"

"You've done enough for one night, Bud," the Tumbling T boss said. "Besides, we're going out for law and order."

He waited until the protesting puncher had taken his departure, then he climbed to his feet. "Reckon that answers your argument, Peaceful," he said. "Black Wygal is plumb set on war. Seems like it would be a shame to disappoint him."

The newspaperman rose wearily. In the lamplight he looked old, tired. "Mebbe you're right, Dave," he said slowly. "Mebbe war is what Black Wygal needs."

Dave Leonard took his departure, splashing out through the mud. And, from the doorway of his office, Peaceful Jordan watched his visitor depart; then the old newspaperman closed the door gently and went back to his desk. Whistling *Sam Bass* softly between his teeth, the old man found pencil and paper and went to work. . . .

It was altogether strange. The work for the week was done; the papers were piled neatly row on row awaiting delivery in the morning. Yet, long after midnight, Peaceful Jordan was still working away. Long after midnight he was still feeding the battered hand press, was still grinding out newspapers. . . .

IN mid-morning, the next day, Clay Webber died. From his room Dave Leonard heard Ma Pearson call his name. He bounded to his feet. She met him in the hall. She said, "He's gone, Dave—he died without regaining consciousness."

He walked downstairs, found a chair on the shaded porch of the hotel. There was no shock. It seemed that he realized from the first that Clay Webber would not live; he had merely refused to admit the fact before. . . .

Bill Gayle came down the street. She saw him seated on the porch, read the news in his face before he had spoken a single word. She came up on the porch. "Clay's dead," she said.

He nodded, not speaking. Her face was tragic. The strength seemed to go out of her, and she dropped in a chair beside him. He sat still, fumbling for words to say.

Far down the street appeared a man on horseback, and he followed the rider's slow advance. In her chair Bill Gayle was crying softly. He waited, helpless. And a dark-skinned man in a big hat came up the hotel steps and peered into his face.

"You are Señor Leonard?"

He looked the man up and down, without interest. "I'm Leonard."

"I have the note for you. A note which a man gave me to give to you, on the road from Little Bend." He proffered a slip of dirty paper. Dave took it, spread it in sunlight, and read:

> Leonard:
>
> My life wouldn't be worth a plugged dime if I testified against Ed Ganns. I know it, so I'm clearing out. Before I go I want you to know that it was Ganns who shot Webber.
>
> Sam Kettleman.

He studied the note in silence; then idly he tore the paper in halves and let the pieces drop at his feet. He stood up slowly. Wilma Gayle's sharp voice caught him.

"Dave! Where are you going Dave?"

In the bright morning light his face was harsh, but his voice was only gentle.

"I've got a little chore, honey," he said. "A job I promised I'd attend to."

Then he was dropping down the porch steps; he was walking swiftly along the wooden sidewalks. His shoulders were set, his long legs moving purposefully. She watched until he disappeared behind the swinging doors of the Silver Dollar saloon, half a block away. Then, mechanically, she stooped and gathered the pieces of the note.

Suddenly, Wilma Gayle was running across the street toward the building which housed the *Marble County Peacemaker*. She hurried through an empty office, an empty press room, to those two rooms in back which served Peaceful Jordan as living quarters. She pounded on the door.

"Uncle Dan! Oh, Uncle Dan!"

Peaceful Jordan's voice came from within. "I'm shaving, Bill. What's the trouble?"

Shaving? In the twelve years he had published the *Marble County Peacemaker* never before had a razor touched the cheek of Peaceful Jordan. Now he was shaving! Even this startling statement held no meaning for the frightened girl.

"Uncle Dan! They've tricked Dave! They've tricking him into a gun-play to kill him—"

Peaceful Jordan opened the door. A razor was in his hand, a towel around his neck. One side of his face was cleanly shaven, one side still covered with lather.

"A trick? What makes you think so, Bill?"

She thrust the pieces of the note at him. "A Mexican gave this to Dave. It's supposed to be from Sam Kettleman."

Calmness flowed from him. "What does it say?"

"It says that Ganns shot Clay Webber. But it's a lie—A lie—"

"Why, Bill?"

"It's a trick to kill Dave!" she cried. "Sam Kettelman can't write. . . . !"

IN the Silver Dollar the bartender moved forward as Dave Leonard lined up at the bar. Only a few men were in the saloon this early; none held interest for the Tumbling T man. The bartender slid a glass across the mahogany, splashed whiskey into it. His voice was roughly sympathetic.

"Hear Clay cashed in."

Dave nodded. He emptied his glass, lingered a moment at the bar, moved toward the door again.

Another block. Before the Stockman's Bar half a dozen horses stood, slack-hipped in the sunlight. Subconsciously, with the instinct of a good cowman, he noted that the animals all bore the Anvil brand. He let his right hand drop, shaking loose his gun in leather, before he pushed through into the bar-room. Inside, the first man he saw was Ed Ganns, standing with one arm draped across the bar.

He walked forward slowly. Beyond Ganns stood Buck Stacey, Anvil foreman, with his left arm, broken by a bronc a few days before, still cradled in a sling. Black Wygal sat at a table in the back part of the room, two Anvil riders with him. Dave lined up against the bar. Ganns turned to face him, waiting for Dave to speak.

Dave's voice was level, toneless. "Clay Webber's dead," he said.

Ganns nodded, hard eyes unblinking. "So they tell me."

A gunman, Ganns, and a killer. He

seemed unperturbed by Dave's presence—seemed even to have been expecting the big Tumbling T man. The scar on his cheek was dead white now; his pale eyes burned as he watched Dave Leonard. Behind him Buck Stacey slipped aside, let his good hand drop until his thumb hooked in his belt just above a walnut-handled gun. Dave saw the move, knew then that he would also have to reckon with the Anvil foreman.

It didn't matter. He watched Ganns' shifting eyes. "I told you I'd be gunning for the gent who downed him," he said.

In the long bar-room were perhaps a dozen men who had no interest in this quarrel—who probably were wishing now that they were anywhere but here. These men had pulled aside, grasping for whatever advantage might lie in being out of the line of possible fire. In the room, also, were half a dozen Anvil riders, and these were closing down on Dave Leonard now like wolves closing in on a hamstrung bull. Only Black Wygal, in his chair in the back part of the room, had not moved.

Ed Ganns straightened slowly and his thin lips curled back. "Was there anything else yuh aimed to say to me?" he asked Dave Leonard.

Dave's voice fell flat. "I'm going to kill you."

Then, suddenly, Ed Ganns could wait no longer. His face was a mask of fury; his hand was clawing for his gun. He was a gunman, was Ed Ganns, and he was plenty fast. As it happened, he was not fast enough, for Dave Leonard had a trick with guns. Dave's first slug, belt-high, smashed Ganns back against Buck Stacey, already diving for his gun.

It knocked the Anvil foreman off balance for an instant. With an oath he shouldered the falling Ganns aside. His gun came up belching flame. A slug tore into Dave's shoulder, spun him half around just as he thumbed two swift shots at Stacey. He saw Stacey stagger and go down. He whirled on those others of Wygal's crew, gun lifting. His voice cracked like a rifle shot.

"I'll kill the man that moves!" he snapped.

And no man moved. Incredibly, he had caught them flat-footed, guns still in leather. They stood in a half circle around him like wolves around to kill. He backed toward the door, gun swinging. Black Wygal had lurched to his feet, was coming forward slowly. The gun turned to cover him. But Black Wygal made no move toward his Colt, although his face was black with fury.

"Yuh'll swing for this, Leonard!" he snarled.

"Mebbe," Dave Leonard said.

He knew then that he wouldn't swing—that the odds were long that he wouldn't leave the room alive. Even with the drop, one man couldn't hold this crew forever. Blood was flowing steadily beneath his shirt, and he could feel strength slipping from him. He hooked an arm over the bar to lend support to legs already sagging at the knees. The room was spinning slowly, and faces were blurring out. . . .

It didn't seem to matter. The Anvil men were closing in. The gun in his hand had become an intolerable burden; it was all that he could do to hold it up. Any second now they would recognize his weakness. Then guns would flame, and it would end.

Behind him a voice said: "Steady, son."

HE turned his head slightly, recognizing the voice of Peaceful Jordan. But the man who stood in the saloon doorway was never Peaceful Jordan. It was a little man who wore Peaceful's clothes, who spoke with Peaceful's voice, but this man wore a gun strapped about his waist, and his smoothly shaven face was the

tight-lipped face of a fighting man on the prod.

Then, standing just within the doorway, the little man spoke again: "Seems like you got the situation in hand, Dave."

And dully Dave Leonard stared at him and wondered if his eyes were playing tricks. The floor was rocking gently beneath his feet, and objects were slipping out of focus. He couldn't see the little man very clearly. Desperately he tried to hold himself erect against the bar, to hold his gun hand up. Then a harsh voice cut through the shell of his blurring senses.

"Hell! That's Peaceful Jordan!"

The closing curtain of fog lifted for an instant, and Dave Leonard saw that this little man with the razor-nicked face was Peaceful Jordan, after all. And then the little man affirmed the fact.

"Sure I'm Jordan," he said. "This is a holiday, and so I shaved my beard. But I couldn't fool you, Wygal; I never thought I could. Or should I call you Slagle?" He stood in the center of the room, hands on hips, grinning a tight-lipped grin. "But mebbe you wouldn't want these folks to know you're the same Jess Slagle wanted for bank robberies in half a dozen states? The gent who robbed a hundred banks, and robbed them all alike. You always lacked imagination, Jess."

And still Dave Leonard had his gun in hand, and still he kept it bearing on those men before him. But just as well he might have holstered it, for he had been forgotten. Every eye in that long room was turned on Peaceful Jordan.

Then Black Wygal spoke, and his voice was a furious bellow: "That's a lie! A lie, I tell yuh—"

"It's truth," said Peaceful Jordan calmly. "I knew you the first day you showed up in this country. I can tick off on my fingers the robberies you've committed since you come here. That's the penalty for no imagination, Jess. That robbery at Little Bend, f'r instance—when Buck Stacey showed up afterward with his arm in a sling, and no one thought to wonder if mebbe it wasn't a bullet what caused the break."

For an instant, then, Peaceful Jordan paused, and not a sound could be heard in that long room. Then the old man went on softly. "You was always smart, Jess. But you wasn't smart enough—not quite. You could hide your face with whiskers. But you couldn't hide that bullet-hole in your hand from the man who put it there."

And Dave Leonard, fighting to hold himself upright against the bar, saw Black Wygal take a quick step forward to stare at Peaceful Jordan with unbelieving eyes. He heard Black Wygal's startled cry of recognition in that instant before hell broke loose.

"You! Sloane!" the bearded man roared. And then: "Get him, gents! That's Salt River Sloane, the outlaw—"

Then, absurdly, Dave Leonard's knees began to buckle, and he sagged gently to the floor. The room seemed to fill with the thunder of roaring guns. And the last thing Dave saw, before his eyes went shut, was Peaceful Jordan, flaming gun in hand, marching forward slowly through blue smoke with a tight grin on his lips.

HE had gone to sleep in sawdust on a bar-room floor. He awoke between sheets, with sunlight splashing a white countenance, and a girl crying softly in a chair beside his bed. He cleared his throat, spoke gently: "What happened, Bill?"

"He's dead, Dave," said Wilma Gayle.

"Dead?"

She nodded wordlessly. "And Wygal's dead," she added. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Oh, Dave, he—he

planned it all—last night. Before it happened—"

"Planned it?" he repeated.

"To kill Wygal, I mean." She unrolled a folded newspaper. "Look! He got out a special edition of the paper last night—"

It was, Dave saw, a copy of the *Marble County Peacemaker*. Her hands were trembling so that it was hard for him to read the print, but he could see that it was the same paper he had glanced over the night before in Peaceful Jordan's office. Only, it had changed. A column in the center of the page was different. He could read the heading:

NEWSPAPER MAN MEETS DEATH

He tried to read the article beneath, but the paper was shaking so that he had to give up. "I'll read it later, honey," he said. "What does it say?"

"It's his story, Dave. His name was Sloane—James Sloane. Not Jordan. He was a newspaperman who turned to ranching when his wife's health failed. But she was killed during a cattleman's war. Uncle Dan killed three men because of it. They made him an outlaw, put a price upon his head. Finally he changed his name and came here to start the paper—"

Dave's right arm was bandaged to his side, but his left arm was free. He reached forth to stroke her hand gently.

"Then Black Wygal came," she said. "Uncle Dan knew him for an outlaw. He knew that Wygal was robbing banks. But he couldn't expose Wygal without giving away his own secret. He let it go. Then, last night, he decided—"

She broke off, crying softly into a wisp of handkerchief. He watched the play of sunlight on the counterpane, letting her cry. She would feel all the better for it afterward.

As for himself, he did not feel certain that the passing of Peaceful Jordan was proper subject for sorrow. A believer in law, Peaceful Jordan had brought law at last into a crook-ridden community by breaking up an outlaw gang. A newspaperman, he had scooped the world by printing the story of his own death. He had paid an old debt of his outlaw days, and made life easier for a girl he loved. And, remembering the tight little grin he had worn into action, Dave Leonard was nowise sure but that high tide in the life of that little man who had rejoiced in the name of Peaceful had not been that final moment when he set out to march down a path of death behind a blazing gun.

The brown hand of the Tumbling T man closed over the slim fingers of the girl. "I wouldn't feel too bad, Bill," he said softly. "Mebbe Peaceful made a few mistakes in his life—but he sure picked a grand way to die!"

In the August 1st Issue—Out July 12th

A Salty, Frontier Short Story

By

JOHN G. PEARSON

TENSLEEP—GALLOWS BAIT

by BART CASSIDY

(Author of "Tensleep—Bounty Hunter," etc.)

Tensleep Maxon, honest outlaw, figured to pay off an old debt to Banker Vickers by standing between him and the howling hang-mob. He forgot, however, that his own neck might fit the noose as well as his friend's, and that the life of a horse thief might prove a tempting tid-bit to that lynch-law posse!

WHEN I ride down into Brule Crick, I'm stony broke an' wonderin' about hawss feed an' about beanses tuh take up the wrinkles in my belly. In most uh these little Montana towns there's some good-natured jigger I can call on fer a round uh drinks an' a little grubstake; some feller I've done a good turn fer.

Brule Crick ain't no exception. Ol' Strang Vickers is a man that'd give you the shirt offa his back fer the askin'. He's

a true son uh the range who's made a success of his Circle V an' invested some uh his earnin's in the Buffalo Bar.

Havin' a friend like him tuh fall back on don't look like a worryin' matter. An' so it wouldn't be, except that I'm already into the old man fer five hundred iron men, same bein' the amount he goes my bail on a hawss stealin' charge I was plumb guilty of. I jumped the bail an' I suppose ol' Strang was stuck fer the bail. I'm ashamed tuh face him, but hunger has a way uh makin' shame hunt its hole. So I rein Red Eye to'rds the Buffalo Bar.

A crowd has gathered across from the saloon. A crowd that's plumb ugly from the way it's crowdin' an' shovin' around the door of a big buildin' that's bin built since I was in Brule Crick. On the windows, in gold paint, is wrote:

STATE BANK OF BRULE CREEK
Capital $100,000 Surplus $50,000

Cripes! Somebody's stuck up the bank, I betcha, an' I'm losin' out on the show. My hunger forgot, I rack Red Eye an' cross the street. At the edge of the crowd, I notice a paunchy feller, smokin' sorta lazy, a scornful smile on his lips an' a star on his vest. Which disappoints me some, knowin' the sheriff wouldn't be hangin' back in a bank hold-up.

Elbowin' through the crowd, I find myself in a cussin', angry mob uh cowmen an' townsfolk, all lookin' at a big sign tacked to the bank door. It says that the bank's closed for business until further notice.

One big blab-mouth cowman raps on the door with the butt uh his hogleg an' gives up head.

"Come outa yore hole, yuh thievin' coyote!" he yells. "Open up this door an' pass us out our money or we'll bust yore damn bank down around yore ears, drag yuh outa the ruins an' leave you tuh ripen on a cottonwood tree."

They all set up a caterwaulin' that's plumb sickenin'. Then a key rattles in the lock an' the door opens. A whiskered face peers out; a face lined an' drawed with care an' with eyes so troubled they haunt me. I gasp. It's my old friend, Strang Vickers.

"My friends," he says, sad. "All I ask is that you be a little patient. We are going through the books to see exactly what the condition of the bank is. Give us time to do a good job. Disaster has struck us an' there's a question whether the bank can continue. But I give you all my word, an' no man can say I ever broke it, that no one of you will lose a cent, if you give me time."

"Tuh hell with time!" raps the blab-mouth cowman. "We want our money now. An' if we don't get it, we'll give you time—in the big house."

"If you crowd me, we all will lose," says Strang. "You are all my friends, an' I want to keep you all that way."

"Friends!" snarls the big leader uh the mob. He starts tuh say more, but somethin' in ol' Strang's eyes stops him. He edges forward till his livid face is plumb in Strang Vickers'. His fists balled, his manner threatenin'. "Don't call me yore friend. Gimme my money now or—"

"What you need, Strang," I pipe up, "ain't so much friends as a good, straight-shootin' bodyguard." I step forward, nudge the big bully outa the way with the muzzle of my six-shooter, an' grin into Strang's starin' eyes.

"Tensleep!" he murmurs, unbelievin'. "Just the feller I wanta see! Come in here a minute."

"Shore," I tell him, an' square around to face them glarin' faces, my gun in my hand. "Which means yore fun's at a end, folks. You heard Vickers say he'd have somethin' tuh tell yuh in his own good time. So, until that time, it's yore cue

tuh stir a high dust, unless you want to augur with power smoke."

MY bluff works; the crowd drifts off, mutterin', an' I step inside. Ol' Strang locks the door an' leads me back to his private office. We set down an' he opens the seegars. When mine's goin' good, I brace him.

"Strang Vickers, President," I read off the door. "Has you plumb took leave uh yore senses? Yo're a horrible example of a cowman gone wrong. A saloon was bad enough. But a bank . . . uh-uh!" I shake my head.

The' ain't an augerment in him. "What you doin' here, Tensleep?" he asks, weak.

"Oh," I say, careless. "I just come rollin' in tuh see might you know some way I might raise the amount uh that bail you went fer me . . . an' lost."

He tosses his hand. "I'd plumb forgot it, Tensleep. If I knew how to raise anything, I'd be doin' it myself to save those folks their savin's. I'm cleaned out.

"First it was Rodd Farley gettin' kidnaped," Strang mourns. "He was picked up right here in town by some lawless outfit, probably the Badlands Bunch, an' they're holdin' him fer twenty-five thousand dollars' ransom. Rodd Farley's the son of our sheriff, Summo Farley. Summo had mighty near that much on deposit here an' drawed it out. That was purty near a week ago. It left me short an' I got a shipment uh money in from the Falls yesterday. Last night, me an' my cashier was checkin' off the number when a feller stuck us up. Some feller that musta bin hidin' inside when we closed up. A feller masked with a sack over his head. He taken another twenty-five thousand. We're cleaner'n a dog's tooth, Tensleep."

"No idea who the feller was?" I ask. "None at all?"

He shifts uneasy. "An idea . . . but no proof. Then too, the idea's sorta crazy an' don't point to'rds doin' the bank no good. Unless I've lost my knack uh judgin' builds an' voices, that lone bank robber was Rodd Farley hisself!"

"No?" I holler. "An' him held up fer ransom, too. How you figger that kin be, Strang?"

"I'm too tired tuh figger," he says, sorta devil-be-damned. "Too broke up. An' all them I've helped; all them I've called my friends, they wanta hang me 'cause some unprincipled son stole me out. I sold the saloon when I opened the bank, but I've still got the ranch—under lease. I'll sell it an' pay 'em back, if it takes ever' cent an' the rest uh my life."

"That's like yuh, feller," I tell him, admirin'. "An' me, I'll stay right here by yuh an' see that they give yuh time tuh work it out. That is, I'll stay if you've got a place I can put my Red Eye pony on the oats, an' a side a bacon I can worry on while I'm bodyguardin' yuh."

"Bless yore heart!" he sigh, layin' his hand on my shoulder. "You take your hawss to the stable an' charge the bill tuh me. Bill Findlay, the stableman, is my friend, an' uh that I kin be shore. You'll live at the house with Maw an' me."

An' that's the way it's left. Strang fixes fer me tuh keep Red Eye in the stable an' we walk to his house, a modest little place at the edge uh town. Strang an' his missus are purty blue, but I make out tuh cheer 'em up some durin' supper, bein' quite some cheered by the vittles my ownself. We talk some after supper an' about nine o'clock I leave the house an' saunter downtown.

Men are gathered in knots, talkin' mad the way folks has a way uh doin' when they lose money, an' all the talk is ag'in' Strang Vickers. Nary a word can I hear concernin' the Badlands Bunch that probably ruined 'em—a robbin', rustlin' crew that holes up along the river somewheres.

That bunch couldn't stay there long or git far if the sheriff was on the job.

I'm lookin' through my second drink in the Buffalo Bar when a rough-lookin' hawss-an'-rope man rattles up to the bar an' orders rye. He tosses if off, grins at me as he rolls a smoke.

"Tensleep Maxon, eh?" he purrs. "Don't stall, feller. I know yuh."

"You've got the best uh me," I glower.

"Which suits me right down to the ground," he grins. "How'd yuh like tuh make some easy money?"

"Lead out," I dare him. But me, I'm bettin' there ain't no such animal."

He grins, leads me into a little rear card room where a thick-set jigger is mopin' over a solitaire.

"Summo," he says, respectful, "here's yore man." Then he backs out.

FACIN' me is the badge-toter who was smilin' so scornful at the bank-storm-in' crowd—Summo Farley. He stirs the seegar between his teeth an' nods to a chair, smilin' with his mouth, but his eyes is bleak an' cold. A hard man.

"Set, Tensleep," he gruffs. "I'm down right proud that you taken my town tuh squat in. It ain't every day a thousand dollars' head money walks right in my door. Careful, boy! Don't glaum onto that smokepole before yuh look under that picture on the wall behind yuh!"

His tone is convincin' an' confident. I sneak a look. Cripes! The maw of a .50 calibre somethin'-or-other is lookin' me right in the eyes.

"This little visit will cost you mebby a ten year sentence, with four off fer good behavior," he drawls. "Then you'll be free tuh spend the tidy pot uh money you've bin savin' after ten years uh hawss—"

"—tradin'," I fill in. "Yeah. Savin' is a theory they write about in books."

"An' give up head about in banks," he snarls, bitter. "We've got a good example uh that right here in this town, as you've seen. Our estimable banker—Vickers. It'll take this range ten years tuh git over his closin' that bank today."

"You don't like Vickers, I take it."

"Why should I?" he barks. "I loan him ten thousand dollars in the winter of the Big Die. It saves his neck. Men just didn't sign notes then. A feller's word was his bond an' he'd die before violatin' it. I've never seen that money, never will. The ol' hypocrite don't even admit that he owes it. Yo're playin' with bad company when yuh tie up with him, Tensleep. Still an' all, I might overlook that an' see yuh outa this deal if you'll be reasonable."

"Such as how?" I ask, cold. Knowin' somehow that he's lyin' about even lendin' ol' Strang any money.

"I'm the one that's in trouble," he snaps, an' digs a note outa his pocket. He tosses it over. "Read that." It says:

> Summo Farley:
>
> We got yore boy, Rodd. You kin have him back fer 25 thousand berries. Rodd gets a beatin' every day an' kin stand mebby ten. So let yore conscience be yore guide. Send one man with the money (gold) to Soapy Hole Spring in the breaks of the Beaver. If you fetch in the law—so long Rodd. It's up to you. But act quick. The kid kin only stand so many uh these hidin's.
>
> The Swift Six.

"Here's yore chance tuh play square with me," he says, sober, "an' clear yore skirts uh this trouble yo're in. I can't git anybody to take the money down there, an' if I go myself they'll think I'm out to nab 'em. You take the twenty-five thousand to these Swift Six jaspers an' come back with Rodd. I'll take a hand-picked crew uh good long-gun men an' make a play fer the outlaws as soon as I see you an' Rodd in the clear. When we git back to town, I'll hand you a hundred dollars fer yore trouble an' let yuh go free. Pervidin' yuh don't play the damn fool an'

insist on bodyguardin' that damn crooked banker. What yuh say?"

I set there, my eyes on the floor, ponderin'. The's lots uh angles to be considered. First, there's my curiosity tuh check on ol' Strang's idea that Rodd Farley was the lone bandit that held up the bank. Second, there's a feelin' that the deal ain't all that it seems, an' a heap more interestin' fer that reason. It occurs tuh me that this may be an excuse tuh git me outa town while they're havin' their way with ol' Strang, which ain't to my likin'. An' then there's the matter uh gettin' out of a trial an' a forced vacation at Deer Lodge tuh be considered. It's shore a facer.

The sheriff's grinnin' at me, but never do I remember lookin' into a colder pair uh eyes. One look, an' I know I've got about as much chance uh goin' free after the deal, whatever it is, is finished as a young colt has uh quittin' a cougar convention.

Farley eyes me narrow. "Well," he rasps, "how about it?"

"Most fellers," I tell him, "have tuh decide things fer themselves in this sin-pimpled world. But here's a case where you're decidin' fer me. I'll take it."

He grunts an' starts talkin'. He gives me my directions, arranges tuh send me off at dawn in the mornin' an' agrees tuh furnish me a pony. Then I leave him an' go on down to ol' Strang's place. Almost all night, the old feller an' me talk the thing over. Him augerin' ag'in' my takin' the chance an' beggin' me tuh make a run fer it now.

"He's not only a lyin' crook," he says, warnin'ly, "but a cold killer as well. He never lent me a cent in his life. Just before the winter of the Big Die, I let him have ten thousand, on nothin' but his word. Then come the blizzards. He used the money to buy hay an' come out in fair shape. The money would uh saved me, but without it I couldn't buy even a ton uh feed. It ruined me. An' when I went to him fer help tuh start, he refused. I told him what I thought of a feller that'd act thataway an' he's hated me ever since. If that was Rodd who stuck me up, I wouldn't put it past Summo to have ribbed the hull affair tuh ruin me."

"But why would he want me tuh go down fer his boy, if his boy is just hidin' out with the bank funds?"

He shakes his head. "Search me, Tensleep. The's only one way tuh find out an' that's tuh go down. But I'm scairt tuh have yuh tackle it."

"Mostly," I say, with pardonable pride, "I'm able tuh take good care uh myself. An' curiosity is a disease that I've had no luck gettin' cured of. You watch the crossin' uh yore suspenders an' the length uh yore neck till I get back. Mebby I'll find out somethin'. But, if not, I can't see how I'll be worse off than I am now—even if I'm dead!"

NEXT mornin' as the eastern sky is gettin' gray, I leave Brule Crick. Straddlin' a wiry little cow pony an' carryin' a pair uh heavy saddlebags supposed tuh contain twenty-five thousand dollars in gold, I'm headin' south into the Missouri River badlands at a high lope.

The sun comes up an' I start throwin' glances over my shoulder for sights of Summo Farley an' his picked riflemen. But nary a sign of dust or riders can I see. An' I grow suspicious, wonderin' if them heavy sacks contain gold after all. I give in to my curiosity after awhile an' open 'em. Gold? I'll tell a man. Eagles an' double eagles, all done up, bank-style in little paper tubes. Cripes. Twenty-five thousand dollars! An' all mine fer just duckin' off the trail an' goin' scarce.

It's a staggerin' thought, yet somehow I can't do it. Suddenly I've got a heap uh respect fer Summo Farley's judgment uh

human nature. Either he's figgered that I'd go on through with it fer the lousy hundred he's offerin', or else he's got me watched by hidden eyes glued to high-power glasses.

I dip into the badlands, a tortured wonderland uh hills deep chiselled by rain an' snow an' wind; of sage-growed wallers, cutbank coulees, blind canyons choked with sage an' antelope brush an' chokeberry scrub.

Midafternoon. The feelin's growin' on me that I'm bein' follered now, an' that's no nice feelin' tuh have. More'n that, I'm within a mile uh Soapy Hole Spring, where somethin' definite is due tuh happen, unless I'm way off trail. I'm passin' through a thick brush thicket when the idea hits me. I jab my pony with the spurs, rein him off the trail an' tear through the brush an' up a narrow-bottomed coule that slants up to'rds the ridge. In fifteen minutes, I'm parked in a clump uh scrub pines from which I can see Soapy Hole Spring an' two miles of the backtrail.

I set down there tuh watch. . . . An' wait.

It takes me half an hour tuh locate the hawss of the rider that's hid out somewhere near the spring. An' by that time, the sheriff an' his posse heave into sight. Makin' no pretense uh travelin' careful. Just canterin' along, joshin' an' laughin' like the whole thing is in the bag. Which I reckon they got a right to think.

They ride right to the spring an' a feller comes outa the brush to meet 'em. They cluster about him an' talk there fer quite a spell. Then he fetches out his hawss, straddles him an' lopes away to'rds the river. An' the posse uh riflemen back track to pick up my sign. Which I know they will, in time.

I don't wait for that time to come. Droppin' off the ridge, I keep it between me an' the posse an' ride the spurs for the river. An hour later, I top a rise, an' find the Missouri almost at my feet. And yonder, where the stream widens out, a ferry boat is half way across, carryin' the lone feller who waited at Soapy Hole Spring to collect the ransom. Beyond it, nestlin' in a cottonwood cove, is Phantom Coulee Saloon—a notorious hangout fer wanted men in the badlands, started, so it's claimed, by Frenchy Leduc, pardner uh ol' Liver Eatin' Johnson, way back in the 'Fifties.

I watch that kidnap gent ride off the ferry boat, spur to a corral, jerk his rig an' go into the saloon. An' that's my cue. I dump out them saddle bags, scoop out a hole in the ground with my Barlow an' bury that gold, fillin' the bags up again with little pebbles. Then, makin' a detour that fetches me to the river a quarter mile below, I ride to the ferry an' jerk the cord that rings the bell on the other side. Bold as if I owned the place.

A little ol' feller with a twisted laig cripples down an' poles the boat over.

Nary word does he utter until we're tied up on the other side. Then he barks a question. But I'm spurrin' my pony to'rds the saloon an' don't hear him. A few minutes later I'm rackin' before the saloon, chucklin' tuh see the little ferryman hump his crooked laig gettin' up to the saloon. That laig, I betcha, ain't no whit crookeder'n the old feller is hisself.

Flankin' the corrals, is a whole row uh little log cabins; beyond 'em is a big barn, fulla bluestem hay an' saddle sheds an' such. But nary a human bein' is in sight. Even the saloon is empty as a floozy's smiles. There ain't a sign of the kidnaper. I walk up an' plant my foot on the rail. An' the old ferryman barges in, all out uh breath.

"I'll see ye a drink," he grouches, "but a drink ain't what fetched ye tuh Phantom Coulee. What is it? Who yuh want here?"

"Well, ol' timer," I grin, "I won't sweat no blood if I don't find nobody, but I could do with a bit of a talk with the gent you jest hauled over before me."

"A stranger tuh me," he says, unconvincin'. "He turns a rented hawss into the c'ral, swallers a drink an' rides his own hawss away. I don't want nothin' tuh do with him or the likes uh him, savvy? I run a decent place here an' I'm in a sweat about the goin's on uh that crowd." He looks all around him, scairt-like—but it ain't quite convincin'. "Be you lookin' fer that kidnaped gent, by ary chance?"

"What if I am?" I ask, noncommittal.

"I'm fer law an' order—me," he assures me. "Ever'body'll tell yuh ol' Pud Hopson is all on the square. Lissen, I betcha you come down here tuh ransom that kidnaped feller out. Now didn't yuh? Nev' mind, I betcha I'm right. Well, you ain't a-goin' tuh have tuh. Them o'nery scamps is gone an' I'm puttin' yuh next, savvy? They'll kill me if ever they find out, but I'll chance it tuh git right with Sheriff Farley an' the law. You come with me."

DOWNING my drink, I foller the hobblin' ol' man along the line uh cabins to the last one. He fishes out a key, opens the door. Inside, layin' on a bunk, is a man, tied hard an' fast. I don't need a second look tuh know it's Summo Farley's boy, Rodd. Likewise that he ain't no part as dangerous or strong as his dad. Ol' Pud Hopson unties the kid an' takes the gag outa his mouth.

Rodd Farley spits out a string uh oaths an' stands up, but he misses the best part of his act. The rope marks on his wrists fade right out. He don't chafe 'em at all, like a feller that'd bin tied up a long time, an' his laigs don't give him no pain. Rodd Farley's bin trussed within the last few minutes. Likely since I showed on the other side of the river.

"Farley," says ol' Pud, cringin', "here's the feller that's come fer you. I hope you'll tell yore dad I done all I could tuh pertect yuh when the scamps was beatin' yuh so bad. An' that I taken this chance when ever'body was away, tuh turn you loose. Where's the money they fetched in here with 'em; you know?"

"Under them old saddles, there," answers Rodd, an' his voice goes sad as he grips the old saloonman's horny hand. "Don't you worry none, Pud. I've bin bad treated here an' somebody's gonna sweat fer the beatin's I've took. But not you. Whatever uh kindness an' care I've had here has bin from you. You bet I'll tell my dad."

He looks so plumb downcast as he's makin' that speech an' the old feller smirks so comical, the whole play smacks uh bein' rehearsed. Besides which, I can't see a mark on Rodd that'd indicate he'd had a hand laid on him. The's somethin' about all this that stinks tuh high heaven, but fer the life uh me I can't figger what it is.

While they're sobbin' over each other, I step into the corner, kick down a pile sack. It's heavy with coin an' crinkly with currency. The bills are still in the bank bundles an' the coins in paper tubes. It's the bank loot. What the hell?

"Now you two light a shuck an' git outa here before them devils come back," ol' Pud Hopson hurries us. "Rodd, you take that roan mare in the second corral. She's fast. Stranger, yore pony looks fresh, so you won't need tuh swap. Now git!"

Which we do, takin' the money along with us. In five minutes, Rodd an' me are bein' ferried across the Missouri an' it's fallin' night. Time we git lined out on the trail, the daylight is gone, an' a big round moon, quarter high, makes the badlands sorta spooky. There's the night

sounds of pack rats rustlin' in the underbrush, rabbits thumpin' warnin's, an' the shrill scream of a screech owl. It's shivery. But that ain't what makes me nervous.

Somewhere close, Summo Farley's posse is likely stalled along my trail—providin' they found where I took to the brush, which I don't doubt. An' when they find me. . . .

Rodd has his eyes down, silent an' moody. He hasn't spoke a word since leavin' the ferry an' I know he ain't seen them riders of the night.

"Feller," I tell him. "We'll bust off to the left here an' take the trail to the west uh this piney ridge. Yonder's an out."

He lifts his head to glare. "What's the idea?" he demands, ugly.

"Don't ask questions, young feller," I tell him, "an' I won't lie to yuh. Just do what I tell yuh."

Somehow his eyes flick up to that ridge an' he sees them riders. I had him figgered fer a slow-thinkin', slow-movin', beardless kid. But he proves me plenty wrong. I never will know where he kept his gun or how he drawed it. But it's in his hand an' I'm lookin' right down the neck of it. His lips is smilin' but his eyes is smoky with hate.

"You simple-minded fool!" he sneers. "My dad hung up a juicy bait an' you come churnin' right into the trap. Look out! Don't make me shoot yuh down like a dog. I don't wanta cheat them others of the pleasure uh seein' you stretch rope."

"What's the idea?" I ask, meek.

"Idea?" he grins savage. "The idea is tuh ruin the man my dad hates, an' send him to the pen fer hirin' a outlaw tuh rob his own bank. All uh Brule Crick knows yo're Strang Vickers' man. Dad knows yo're Tensleep Maxon an' he'll collect a thousand dollars on yore dead body. The posse yonder will find the bank loot, which same my dad will find to be just a few uh the bills an' a lotta paper. He'll pocket the rest. Then too, you've got the ransom money—marked money some of it—in yore saddle bags. An' I name you as the feller that kidnaped me an' bragged uh holdin' up the bank in cahoots with Vickers. You pore damn fool!" Without shiftin' his glance offa his sights, he lifts his voice in a loud beller. "All right, Dad! Here's yore man! Come down an' nab him."

From the ridge sifts an answerin' yell an' they're jumpin' their ponies down the slant. An' in one quick minute I see hell's doors swingin' wide—Fer me, an' fer ol' Strang Vickers. It's an iron-clad case, an' one the Brule Crick folks already aroused won't ever allow tuh come tuh trial.

I slam the spurs into my pony an', as he rears into Rodd's gun, I slide around the neck uh my pony—a trick I learned as a kid from the Cheyennes on the Rosebud. The gun snarls, an' I hear Rodd holler with fear as I come into the saddle again with a liftin' .45. I hear my pony grunt, feel him shiver as he takes the bullet meant fer me. Then I'm rockin' the hammer an' drivin' a slug through Rodd's right shoulder, knockin' him off his hawss.

THROWIN' the guthooks into my pony, I roar into the mouth of a coulee with a sinkin' feelin' in the pit uh my stummick. My hawss is wounded, how bad there's no time tuh find out. The posse is right on my tail. The shadows in the coulee are black as death, an' no tellin' what lays ahead.

The pony runs like a scairt rabbit, a quarter mile, mebby. Then he slows down an' begins tuh fade. I pour the steel to him but he don't feel it, because somethin' far more painful is oozin' the life right out of him. I hurl him around a sharp bend in the coulee an' he loses

footin', rollin' in a full somersault. I light clear an' run to him. He ain't dead but he'll never git up again. I'm afoot in the badlands, with a fortune on my hands an' a blood-sweatin' posse on my tail!

I cut the money sack off the horn an' turn tuh scamper into the brush. But it's no go. I'm within a hundred feet of the boxed end of a blind canyon. With straight sides all around. An' the hoof-beats of the posse commencin' to filter in to me. Trapped.

About two-three minutes later, they come roarin' into the box, guns glitterin' in their hands, an' Summo Farley in the lead. I raise my hands an' they light off to surround me.

"Here's the murderin' rat that kidnaped an' leaded my boy!" he snarls. "Ah-ha—it's that Tensleep feller, bodyguard to Strang Vickers! You gents heard what Rodd said back yonder. Said this feller shot him without a chance; that he's got the ransom money an' the money robbed from the bank right on him. If you gents feel it's warranted, I'll turn my back while you string him up."

"Wait a mo', Summo," cautions one of 'em, an' I see that it's ol' Bill Findlay, the Brule Crick stableman an' friend uh Strang Vickers. "Rodd give up a lotta head back yonder an' I ain't doubtin' that mebby he's right. But le's not go too fast. First, where's the money?"

Summo is smirkin' as he goes to the saddle bags, unbuckles 'em an' starts pullin' out stones. His cussin' lifts to the stars.

"Damn his o'nery thievin' soul!" he rants. "He's cached it. Twenty-five thousand dollars. What'd yuh do with it?" He glares at me. "Tell me, or I'll—"

"I paid it to the kidnapers, like you sent me tuh do," I lie, cheerfully. "What did you expect me tuh do?"

"He lies like hell!" blats the sheriff, but changes the subject. "Where's the money robbed from the bank that was tied to his saddle horn?"

"Hold on, Summo," hollers Bill Findlay. "How could Rodd know the bank money was in that sack?"

"Tensleep made his brags thataway," growls the lawman. "Rodd said so. An' Rodd ain't no part of a liar."

"No," I put in, "but I am."

"Where is that sack, Tensleep?" asks the stableman.

"Yonder, ag'in' the river bank," I tell him.

"It's plumb empty," hollers one of the possemen.

"Enough uh this!" Summo snarls. "We're wastin' time, an' Rodd's bleedin' tuh death, mebby. If he does, I'll hang this feller fer murder. If not, I'll send him an' that crooked banker to the pen fer life." He turns to the stableman. "Bill, you're the lightest man amongst us an' you've got the biggest hawss. You take Tensleep up an' I'll handcuff him to yore horn. Pick up Rodd an' start with half the boys fer town. Me an' the rest, we're goin' over this coulee inch by inch. He's buried the money here somewheres, an' I'm gonna find it."

Which they do. We ride outa there, leavin' Summo Farley an' his men buildin' a big fire tuh stage the hunt with. The feller who was left with Rodd is helpin' him onto his hawss when we git there. An' he gives up head scandlous, howlin' lies about what he's seen an' what I've bragged about, buildin' a noose around my neck an' Strang Vickers'. He's purty well wore out when the few town lights show in the distance.

Bill Findlay's pony, packin' double, is laggin' behind. Ol' Bill is cussin' soft, puzzlin' things out. "It's ol' Strang I'm worried about," he mourns. "Can't you shed no light that'll help his case, Tensleep?"

"Shore I can," I tell him, an' do—pin-

nin' all my hopes on the friendship him an' Strang are supposed tuh have fer each other. I give him all I know of the story, an' I reckon there ain't much tuh fill in.

"Well I'll be go-tuh-hell!" he murmurs, an' I detect a little admiration in his voice. He don't git a chance tuh say more. Sheriff Farley an' his men roar up behind us.

He's madder'n a deviled badger. He's searched that coulee from end tuh end, an' no money. He orders two of his men tuh drag Strang Vickers outa bed an' throw him in jail. Me, he takes in tow personal, vowin' tuh draw me gut by gut, an' throw the remains to the buzzards.

ALL that long day me an' Strang set in that clammy jailhouse listenin' to Summo Farley cuss himself into killin' rages an' out again, an' into wheedlin' pleadin' spasms. I reckon that man'd hang his own son fer money. Four times he strips me down to the buff an' searches the seams uh my levis fer that fifty thousand dollars. An' in the evenin' he quits, havin' learned nothin' an' bein' fit tuh tie fer that reason.

No food. No water. No hope tuh speak of. Strang is blue—fer me, an' me fer him. I reckon that's the way with men when they teeter over the Big Slide. Darkness falls. Summo comes back, polluted with likker.

"In the Buffalo Bar," he leers, "they're talkin' purty savage. If they try tuh crack the jail, I'll do all I can."

"Tuh git us hung," I put in. An' then my ears ketch the low roar that men let go when they're lustin' fer a life. I look out the window. Lanterns are swinging in the street, showin' a mob movin' on the jail. I shudder a little, but Strang takes it like a soldier. He sticks out his hand.

"I'm sorry on yore account, Tensleep. Good bye, kid."

"Wormy graves, Strang," I come back with forced hooraw. "I'll do what I can tuh git you outa this when the time comes."

The roar uh harsh voices swells as they near. The sheriff grins at us. "You still got a chance," he hums. "Two chances. My chance uh fightin' off the mob an' the chance uh tellin' where you hid that money."

I shake my head, too mad tuh answer him. I'd gladly swing now if only I could git my fingers at his thick throat. Over the outside roar comes a scream. I look out. Rodd Farley, held up by two men, is in the lead of the procession.

"Dad!" he cries. "It's a lynchin'. Oh, my God! Don't open the door. Don't. . . ."

Somebody throttles him an' then they're hammerin' on the door. "Open it up, Summo!" calls a voice, an' my heart sinks. It's Bill Findlay's voice. He's failed me . . . an' Strang. "Open up or we'll tear it down."

Summo is thoroughly enjoyin' it. "That was my boy hollerin' out there. Tryin' tuh hold back a gang from hangin' the man that shot him. That's bein' a Christian, gents. You tellin' where that money's hid, Tensleep?"

"Not noticeable," I grin, mirthless.

"Then you can't blame me fer not riskin' my life tuh save yores," he grunts, as the door busts in. The crowd surges inside carryin' ropes, guns an' axes. Summo Farley's standin' there, lookin' smug as a tom-cat with a canary feather on its whiskers.

"Grab 'im, men!" Bill Findlay barks, an' lays hold uh Summo Farley.

"What's this?" yelps the sheriff, an' Rodd Farley's weepin' musta wised him 'cause he turns pale as moonlight. "You can't do nothin' like this—"

Somebody smashed his words back into his teeth an' they drag him an' Rodd away, both hollerin' an' wailin' like troubled ghosts. Me an' Strang look at

each other, too surprised tuh speak. Then Bill Findlay is unlockin' the door an' bouncin' up to me.

"Summo worked up the crowd's appetite tuh kill," he explains. "An' when I come back from the river, it wasn't hard to change their mind about the two victims. You didn't tell me no part of a lie, Tensleep. I dug up the money you buried on the ridge, an' found the stole bank money where you hid it—way down the dead hawsse's neck! Strang, the bank's safe, thanks to this boy. When the ropes shut off that caterwaulin', we'll sift over to the Buffalo fer a drink, pay Tensleep a thousand dollars reward an' talk over candidates to succeed our deceased sheriff."

Like I said before, in most uh these Montana towns the's some good-natured jigger I can call on fer a round uh drinks an' a little grubstake. Some feller I've did a good turn fer. Brule Crick ain't no exception. . . .

In the Next Issue—Out July 12th!

TENSLEEP MAXON

the Most Lovable Outlaw of the Old Frontier, takes a hand at reforming a friend, and finds his reward in the guns of a sheriff's posse!

Another Great Tensleep Yarn by

BART CASSIDY

by CLIFF FARRELL
(Author of "Cowman Renegade," etc.)

LONG ODDS

Larry Sloan pushed the remnants of his small herd through a thousand dusty, trail-weary miles from Texas to Montana, seeking a new hope, a new start for his once-famous brand. He found there, instead, a hostile range, the threat of a ruinous Northern winter, and the snarl of bushwhack lead—odds which no one but a dyed-in-the-wool Texas cowman would dare to battle!

SQUAW winter had left its white trail among the rugged crags of the Shoshones, but the range below dreamed in the balmy haze of Indian summer. Larry Sloan rode slowly down a long-walled Montana cowspread, frowning, the foreboding of disaster welling to full strength within him.

It was five months ago to the day that he had piloted the Turkey Track herd out of the old ranch on the Brazos. This should have been the end of a tough trail for Larry Sloan and the footsore cattle he had left twenty miles behind—pitiful remnant of the once-mighty brand his father had established thirty years before in Texas.

But he paused his horse to stare with troubled eyes that were gray and vivid against the smoky bronze of his skin. He had expected that this ranch would be deserted and waiting for him and his herd.

Instead, smoke rose from the cookhouse stack; many saddles rode the top rail of the cavvy yard. Three booted men, belt guns hitched back for comfort, spun

FOR A TEXAN!

A Cattle-Trail Novelette

dice on a flat rock against the bunkshed. They favored him with brief, impassive glances, then went on with their game. They did not even nod.

Larry swung stiffly down. He had been in the saddle so much these past months that he felt handicapped afoot. His torn, weather-beaten garb hung limp on his rawboned frame.

A man appeared in the door of the squatty, dirt-roofed headquarters building. He filled the opening from side to side. And, though he wore no hat, he was forced to duck his mop of red hair as he barged out. He was big all over, and none of his bigness ran to fat.

He viewed Larry with flat, yellowish eyes set close by a crooked nose, slashed by a purple scar. Then he turned and growled a word to someone inside, and a second, older man appeared. This one was perhaps fifty, Larry judged, with a sallow horsey face that bobbed from a celluloid collar on a thin neck. The man's black coat caught the bulge of a holster gun. He did not wear cow garb.

"Howdy," the big man said shortly. It was not so much a greeting as an arrogant question.

"What spread is this?" Larry asked.

The giant jerked a thumb toward a weather-faded sign over the door. "That don't lie, cowboy. This is the Rockin' W. You're talkin' to Big Griffith. I rate as range boss. An' this is Milt Warnack, owner."

Larry looked around. "And what state is this?" he queried wryly.

They stared and Big Griffith scowled. "She's Montany every day in the week, an' twice a day when the blizzards howl. Anythin' else you're curious about?"

Larry nodded slowly. "Yeah. I had an idea you Rockin' W people would have vacated before this. I've got two thousand head of shorthorns comin' up the line. We've been racin' winter all the way north, an' we've made it under the wire by a hairline. This weather can't hold much longer, so we're right anxious to locate the cattle before it breaks."

They glanced sharply at each other.

The giant grew sarcastic. "Son, yuh ain't been drinkin' loco tea, have yuh? Yuh ain't—"

Milt Warnack interrupted him. "What are you driving at, fellow?" he demanded curtly.

"I'll put it this way, Warnack," Larry said grimly. "Six months ago I got a letter from my father, Tim Sloan—Tobasco Tim, some folks call him—sayin' that he had bought the Rocking W spread ten miles out of Paleyville, Montana. Our own Turkey Track had been whittled, rustled and lawed down to a whisper in Texas. It was time to try our luck in new range. So here we are, lock, stock an' barrel."

BIG GRIFFITH'S derisive guffaw rolled out, ending the dice game and bringing the players to inspect Larry with hard gaze. Four more came drifting from the bunkhouse. An unusually big crew, with roundup over; a crew that loafed instead of working. All packed belt guns, and some a brace. Larry knew the breed. These men drew pay for their fighting nerve rather than for their cow-savvy.

Warnack was smiling, too, a smile that had no warmth. "I remember your father," he said. "He did come out and look the place over, last April. But he wasn't within a long shot of my price. He was mistaken, my friend."

"Tobasco Tim wasn't in the habit of makin' mistakes like that," Larry stated flatly.

Warnack's pale gaze had hardened. "He made one that time, fellow," he snapped. "You had better take my word for it. This ranch belongs to me, and always will. If you don't believe it you can take a look at the title in the court house."

"I figure to do just that," Larry commented.

Big Griffith gave a snort of anger. "You're beginnin' to git under my hide," he growled at Larry. "Milt, this hombre is tryin' to run a sandy on yuh. Say the word an' I'll hightail him out of here in a hell of a hurry. I don't like the set of his brisket ner the slant of his beak. I could alter 'em aplenty."

"I'll maybe accommodate yuh some time," Larry said with a cheerless grin. "Right now I got other things to worry about. For one, I need a home for two thousand head of Turkey Track stock. Another is that I'd like to know what happened to Tim Sloan."

"What do you mean—happened to him?" Warnack asked indifferently. "Has he got himself lost?"

"I haven't heard a word from him since he wrote me to start the outfit north. He allowed he would meet the drive in Miles City an' pilot us. He didn't show. I found my own way."

"He's fell into a gopher hole, maybe," Big Griffith sneered.

Warnack shrugged. "I run no bureau for missing Texicans," he remarked. "The last I saw of him he allowed he might head over into the Dakotas to see if any cheap grass was to be had. Anything else you want to know?"

"Plenty," Larry said tersely. "But I'll ask some other day."

He mounted, but Warnack stepped forward. "One thing, Sloan," he warned curtly. "I wouldn't advise you to drive any farther up Convict Crick. You'll be on my grass soon, and I like my grazing fees in advance."

Larry paused. "So you knew I was driving up Convict Crick. That means you knew I was pointed for your range. Why didn't you stop my drive before this?"

Warnack spat an oath. "Maybe you better wait and ask Tobasco Tim Sloan when he shows up."

"I've got a feeling I'd wait forever," Larry's voice stabbed back. "If my father

was alive I'd have heard from him. That adds up to the fact that he's dead. I mean to find out where he died—an' why."

"Maybe he went around claimin' ranches he didn't own," Big Griffith put in. "That's fatal—always. See?"

Milt Warnack was smiling thinly again, with the assurance of a man who sits back of a pat hand. "You pulling out with your longhorns, Sloan?" he asked with an attempt at sympathy.

"It's too late to pull out. Winter would nail us. We're in the Shoshone range to stay. We've made a one-way trail."

"There'll be work for the bone pickers in spring," Warnack said. "But since you're up against it, I might give you a hand, young fellow. I've got room to winter a couple thousand head. I cut a good hay crop and can take care of 'em if they don't rough through on their own."

"Grazin' fees an' hay take money," Larry said dryly. "I'm fresh out of money. We sold everything that would market to raise a stake for a new range."

"We could make a deal."

"Meanin' that I could pay with cattle," Larry remarked. "The Turkey Track is mainly she-stuff and calves. By the time I had beef to sell, your feed bill would have eaten up the herd. You'd own it, not me. That didn't occur to yuh—or did it?"

Warnack's coffin-jaw snapped taut, and he framed a sneering retort. But it was not voiced. A half-broken horse swung around the bunkhouse, bearing a tow-headed, jean-clad rider. A boy of fifteen or sixteen, Larry tabbed him.

He had angry eyes for nobody but Milt Warnack. "Yuh snake-backed crook," he exploded, hitting the ground and striding up like a game-cock. "You an' your bunch of coyotes turned a herd on the bench we had been savin' for winter range. It's grazed clean. Yuh can't git away with it any longer, Warnack. Everybody else in this range might think you shake the ground when you an' these gun-packin' sons walk past, but I'm tellin' yuh that I ain't up no tree."

"Just a minute, Barnes," Warnack barked at the kid, his eyes like smouldering coals. He turned to Larry. "You'll be ridin' now, cowboy, I take it."

Larry looked at the lank boy who was gazing around defiantly. "Yeah," Larry said casually. "I'll be ridin'."

He swung into the saddle, and without another word headed away. He rode two hundred yards, until the ranch house hid him, then slid from the saddle, and came back afoot, walking rapidly.

He heard the sharp spat of a hard palm on a face. He bounded ahead with a muttered curse.

THE rage-choked voice of the boy came shrill: "Leggo me, yuh big dough-belly, before I——"

"Grab his legs, Bowie," Big Griffith's bellow sounded. "Somebody bring a pair of chaps. We'll make it right painful for this brat to set a saddle for awhile."

Larry peered around the corner of the house. The tow-headed boy was down, squirming, but helpless beneath Big Griffith's knee. The giant mercilessly ground his face in the dust.

Milt Warnack stood by, sneering approval. A gunman, grinning, was heading for the bunkhouse.

Larry came out fast. They did not know he was there until his fist crashed on Big Griffith's jaw. It snapped the giant's head back. He reeled on his knees, blood spurting from his face.

Then Larry drove a sledge-like smash to the paunch. He whirled, knowing that he had nothing to fear from Big Griffith for some minutes to come. His gun appeared in his fist, and he crouched a little; his eyes flicking smokily over Warnack and his hard-faced crew.

Taken by surprise, they stayed their

impulse to draw and took root. Larry's vivid gray eyes carried a message more grim than the dark bore of the gun that weaved belly-high.

The towhead arose shakily, digging at eyes filled with dust and tears of rage.

Milt Warnack's voice was shaking. "You seem bent on stayin' in this range don't you, Sloan? You'll be accommodated. This climate is hard on nosey warts that don't know enough to keep ridin' in the right direction after it's been pointed out to 'em."

"Turn your backs," Larry commanded.

They hesitated. Larry's gun hammer clicked up. Slowly they turned.

"Now drop your gun belts an' step away," he directed. "One at a time, beginnin' with the hog-necked little gopher on the right."

They cursed, but guns began dropping. Warnack was the last to comply. Larry moved slowly to him, ran hands over the black coat, and laughed as he found a hide-out, a short-barreled .38. He threw it far over the ranch-house roof.

"Which of these brave, upstandin' men slugged yuh, son?" he asked the freckle-faced kid.

"Aw, Warnack smacked me, after that big hippo had hit me an' grabbed me," the towhead flashed.

"Haul off an' let him have one in return," Larry offered.

Milt Warnack's face was deadly. "Go ahead, kid," he challenged thickly. "Then, you know what I'll do. Before morning this range will be rid of one sneaking nester and his crawling brats."

Larry saw the boy wilt and back away, the fire dying from his eyes. "Yuh wouldn't," the lad said, and for the first time there was real fear in his voice. "You wouldn't do that, Warnack? Don't take it out on them. They don't know I racked over here. Let 'em alone, damn yuh. I'll—I'll kill yuh if yuh don't!"

"Let's pull out, kid," Larry said gently. "Pile your horse. You'll find mine the other side of the house. Haze him around here while I keep these vinagaroons under my heel."

"You better keep going, Barnes," Warnack spat at the boy. "This stranger pushed his horns into this. Let him pull 'em out himself. That's good advice to a fool kid."

"By thunder, he helped me an' I'm goin' to help him!" the boy cried. "I'm no rat."

He mounted, pounded away and came back in a minute leading Larry's mount. Larry backed to it and swung into the saddle.

"I'll see you again soon, Warnack," he promised. "And if I hear of any nesters bein' burned out I'll be back in a hurry. I've got seven men in my crew, an' they never missed a skunk yet with a .45."

HE AND the boy backed around the house, then wheeled and raced away. They passed a windbreak of cottonwoods before any of the Rocking W crew appeared. Larry expected them to open up, but a rise in the ground carried them high enough to bring the yellowed foliage of the trees up as a barrier.

There was no pursuit, either; and after half a mile Larry brought the pace down to a jog. He grinned at the tow-head.

"What's the first name—Pepper, Freckles or Pinto?"

"It's Speck. Speck Barnes. Say, cowboy, you better not linger in this range. Warnack's bad enough, but what you did to Big Griffith—oh, man! He'll kill yuh sure!"

"Uh-huh. Where do you hang your hat, Speck? You a family man?"

The freckled face sobered. "My dad's got a little place over on Lame Mule crick, about eight miles west against them needle buttes. We ain't nesters either. We run our own brand. Got three hundred

head. We put in some corn an' garden truck to help out, an' buy shoes for mom an' the kids. Warnack took that as an excuse for tryin' to run us out of the Shoshone country, allowin' we was nesters. He wants our water rights on the crick."

"You're a cowboy, too, then. Shake. I'm Larry Sloan, fresh up from Texas with a drive."

"A trail herd? Whatcha doin' with a drive this late in the year. Where yuh winterin'?"

"I don't exactly know yet," Larry admitted.

"Yuh better find out in a hurry. This here is Montana, an' before long you'll think you've hit the North Pole instead. I know."

"Ever hear any rumors that Milt Warnack had sold out his spread last spring?" Larry asked.

Speck looked thoughtful. "My paw did hear gossip. It was a Texas man they said was lookin' over the Rockin' W with an eye to buyin'. But no such luck for this range. Nothin' ever come of it. Yuh can't git rid of snakes that easy."

Larry pointed westward. "Here comes a rider, an' he's sure standing up in the stirrups. Swinging toward us, too."

Speck peered, then gave a groan. "Oh, man! I'm in for some hell now. That ain't a man, that's a she-devil. It's Ann, my sister. She's always tryin' to haze me around."

"One of the kids you have to buy shoes for, eh?" Larry grinned.

But his grin died. He had expected a frowsy-headed ranch girl. But there was nothing frowsy in the softly-moulded little face framed by a weathered slouch hat. Even the worn jeans, tucked here and there beneath a leather belt to fit a slim waist, and the faded flannel shirt had grace and shapeliness on her trim figure. Ann Barnes was well-tanned, and Larry read the story of toil and worry in the set of her straight, little mouth. In contrast to her brother she was dark-eyed.

HE BELIEVED there was thankful relief in her attitude as she drew up. She cast an inquiring glance at Larry, then pinned her brother with accusing eyes.

"Where have you been, Speck?" she demanded. "I told you to stay home. You——" then she saw the crimson print of fingers on the boy's thin cheek, and she gave a little, startled cry.

"Aw, stay home yourself," Speck blustered. "Leave us men alone, can't yuh, Ann? I ain't been any place that's your affair."

"You didn't—didn't go to the Rocking W?" she asked breathlessly.

Speck became defiant. "What if I did? It's about time somebody got their back up."

"What happened?" she asked tensely.

Speck flushed. "Griffith, the big ring-tailed bull, smacked me when I wasn't lookin'. Then he piled me, an' Warnack hit me too. They was goin' to larrup me, but Larry Sloan, here, showed up an' give 'em a peek down the barr'l of a .45. They caved like the yaller bellies I always said they was."

"Oh, why did you do it?" she asked shakily. "They'll only take it out on dad. And he's got enough to worry about as it is. Oh, Speck, your face! The cowards! Hitting a boy."

"Hell," Speck said disdainfully. "In another minute I'd have busted loose an' plowed 'em under. But Larry beat me to it."

She eyed Larry uncertainly.

"I'm new in this country," he explained. "I happened to be there when your brother took on Warnack and his whole crew. The odds seemed a little steep, even for a rangatang like old Speck here, so I sided in with him."

The girl was troubled. "I'm glad, of course, that you helped Speck, but I'm afraid you had better——"

Larry interrupted her. "I know. I'd better sneak out of the Shoshone country before Milt Warnack cuts off my ears or hangs me over a slow fire. I've been told that a couple of times today. I'm wonderin' just how he rates his horns, and what makes him snort fire and brimstone."

She did not respond to his smile. "Warnack is out to bog this range," she said slowly. "Everybody knows it. He's crowded out all the little ranchers to the east and north. Now he's starting on little spreads like ours to the west. You either sell out dirt cheap or be burned and poisoned into poverty. He's got half a dozen gunmen and as many tough riders to help him."

"Well, I couldn't run away, even if I was of a mind," Larry said. "I've got two thousand Turkey Track cattle walkin' up Convict Crick."

Both of them looked interested, and they backed away to eye the brand on Larry's horse. "Turkey Track," Speck exclaimed. "I couldn't figure what that brand was. It's the same as on that dead horse I found up Steamboat Crick last June, Ann. I'd never seen a brand like—"

Larry had wheeled. "What kind of a horse was it?"

Speck was taken aback by the change in the Texan's face. "Why—why best I could make out it was a big blue roan with white socks in front. Buzzards had——"

"Old Apache," Larry breathed. "My father's horse. What had killed it?"

"Bullet through the head," Speck said, his nostrils flaring as he sensed Larry's tenseness. "I figured it had fell over a cut bank an' been put out of its misery by the rider."

"Did you look around any?"

"No. I was ridin' the crick for bogged stock an' didn't think much about it, outside it bein' a brand I didn't know."

Larry looked at the sun. "Too late to do anything about it today," he mused. "If I come tomorrow can you lead me to that spot, Speck?"

"Sure can. It's only six-seven miles from our place, but—"

The girl spoke up quickly, sharply. "Speck!"

The boy stared defiantly. "Oh, hell," he said sullenly.

Larry gazed, his eyes narrowing. "I savvy," he said slowly. "It's dangerous to monkey with affairs that don't concern yuh in this range, ain't it?"

The girl could not meet his eyes. "Come on Speck," she exclaimed desperately, wheeling her horse.

But she drew up abruptly after the horse had made a few strides, turned and looked at the silent Texan. "Speck will show you the place," she said steadily. "We owe you that much for helping him. But that's all we—that's all he'll do."

CHAPTER TWO

Death Strikes!

IT WAS ten o'clock when Larry rode wearily up to the Turkey Track wagon, whose naked bows stood out against a sky hazy with stars. The cook was in his tarp, but five bronzed men were awaiting him.

One lifted brush to revive the fire, but Larry stopped him. "Let it die," he said grimly. "And don't target yourselves against it, amigos. We'll do our sleeping out in the shinnery away from the wagon tonight."

Red Turnbull, lank Texan who had thrown his kak on Turkey Track horses for fifteen years, eyed him keenly.

"Injuns out, Larry?" he asked.

Larry was terse. "Worse, maybe. I've stirred up a gun nest. Tobasco Tim has disappeared. I figure he's dead—mur-

dered, most likely. The ranch we're supposed to own is held by a horse-faced grass-hog named Warnack. Claims he never sold it to my dad. And he's got a string of bullet pushers to back up his play."

"Is that all?" Turnbull remarked ironically.

Larry looked around. "Swede an' Dobe are ridin' herd, eh? Jim, you and Mack and Mule take your hardware and go out with them. Better send Dobe in. He's going to Paleyville with me tomorrow and will need some rest. Two of yuh swing a wide circle, and listen for any hoot-owls that might be——"

A gunshot snapped through the night, jerking the Texans to their feet.

It had come from the far side of the meadow in which the herd was bedded. Like fireflies more guns spurted against the brush of the creek bottom. Larry could see the shining backs and horns of the cattle reflecting the flashes.

The herd rumbled to its feet instantly. A red glow of fire leaped up across the meadow. Some one had lighted a torch or a blanket soaked in oil."

"I was too late," Larry grated. "They're spookin' the herd. They didn't waste any time gettin' here. Rattle your hocks, boys!"

He was already leaping into the saddle. A momentary breathless pause held the scene. Then the herd stampeded with a roar. They came billowing down upon the wagon. Larry turned and swung the bewildered cook aside behind him. The crew, swearing mechanically as they pulled cinches on picketed horses, hit the saddle, and all swept clear in time.

The wagon went over as cattle piled against it. The stampede rolled past unchecked.

Larry did not follow the run. Teeth set, he swept in the opposite direction, unloading the cook out of danger. He headed toward the creek brush where the ashes of the burned blanket still glowed.

He passed a riderless cow-horse, trotting uncertainly about, but did not pause. Now, with the roar of the herd receding a trifle he marked the nearer sound of horses crashing away through the brush.

His six-shooter began to roll spiteful flame in that direction. Guns came to life in nervous, excited response, the bullets whining dismally around him. He plunged into the brush in pursuit. But his horse had a day of hard riding under it already, and after a few minutes he pulled up, realizing that it was hopeless.

He rode back to the horse with the vacant saddle. The animal was from Swede Gunderson's string. Larry circled about and after a long time, he came upon the thing that had been Swede Gunderson. The stampede had passed over the cowboy.

Presently Reb Turnbull came riding back and Larry hailed him. "We was lucky," Reb said, trotting up. "The timber turned 'em and we milled 'em to a stop in a hurry. Lost a few head an' some calves, though."

"Swede wasn't lucky," Larry said harshly. "He went under the stampede with a bullet in his back."

The Turkey Track riders rode close herd for the remainder of the night, and as they rode they were thinking of the shapeless form under the tarp near the wrecked wagon.

AT DAWN Larry and Reb Turnbull rode down into the creek brush to study hoof tracks.

"Five or six of 'em," Red estimated.

Larry walked farther and picked a hat from a wild rose thicket. He ran a finger through a bullethole in the crown, then tried it on. The hat was enormously big. It came down to his ears.

"One of my slugs didn't miss far,"

Larry said. "Men with heads like this are easy to find."

"An' sometimes hard to kill," Turnbull commented.

They buried Swede Gunderson beneath a cottonwood that commanded the scene of the stampede. As the silent task was completed, Larry laid aside a shovel and looked at one of his riders—a silent, wiry, under-sized man of uncertain middle age with pale blue eyes.

"I'm ridin' into Paleyville, Dobe," Larry said. "I'd like you with me. I want to look at the Rocking W title. Then we'll go out to the Barnes place and see that blue roan."

Dobe Darnell nodded. He was frugal of words. It was said of Dobe that he had been first an outlaw, later marshal of a roaring trail town. Dobe himself had never talked of his past. Only one thing the Turkey Track men knew to a certainty about Dobe: He was chain lightning with a gun, a good man to back up to in a tight; loyal to his friends, and relentless to enemies. There was not one of the crew who wouldn't have gambled his brightest hopes of the future for the sake of accompanying Larry. But Dobe's right was conceded without argument.

"If you're not back by dark we'll come a-lookin' for yuh," Turnbull declared. "To hell with the cattle."

As they rode away, the big hat Larry had found in the brush, swung on his saddle horn. Carbines hung beneath *rosaderos*, and gun braces weighted their thighs.

"How can a man sell a ranch, then cover it up afterwards?" Larry muttered after a long silence.

"Hard to say," Dobe declared. "But it has been done. It takes crooked work in the recorder's office."

"That would be mighty hard to prove," Larry admitted. "And Tobasco might have been killed before the deal was closed."

"He said in his letter he had bought the spread," Dobe pointed out. "And when he wrote that letter he had a deed in his pocket, and it had been recorded. You can gamble on it."

"If he had used a check we'd be able to trace it," Larry groaned. "But he never believed in checks, and he figured ready money would talk. He had it with him, twenty-five thousand in hundred-dollar bills. Had it sewed in his clothes."

It was nine o'clock when they rode down Paleyville's main street. A scatter of ranch buckboards and buggies dotted the rails, and here and there stood knots of saddle horses. A swamper was polishing the brass letters on the window of the Keystone Bar. A clerk lifted the blinds of a bank and yawned. A plump woman, hurrying across with a basket of groceries, rattled Dobe's horse, and she scowled absently, then paused to gape as she read the stamp of the long trail on them.

Larry marked the county building, and they tied up before the barn-like frame structure with a bell tower. Larry went in alone mounting to the second floor and entering a door marked as the county recorder's office.

A clerk studiously ignored him as he rolled his spurs to the counter. There was a private office at the rear. Through the opened door he saw two men in ear-to-ear parley at a desk.

One was Milt Warnack. The horse-faced cowman must have felt Larry's sharpening gaze, for he turned. With a startled glance he kicked the door shut.

"I'd like to palaver with the recorder," Larry told the clerk.

"He's busy now. You can wait."

"He's a pretty good pal of Milt Warnack's ain't he?" Larry drawled casually.

The clerk grinned. "Maybe. They're brothers-in-law."

Larry stood an instant staring at the closed door, then went out.

"Any luck?" Dobe asked.

"I was too late. The recorder is Warnack's brother-in-law, an' is bein' coached to look innocent if we start peckin' him about that title. That answers one thing for us. It wouldn't have been hard for Warnack to keep any record of the sale off the county books."

The helpless sensation of bucking a stone wall was upon Larry. He cast a glance at the distant Shoshone range. Sunshine still bathed the soaring scarps, but a thin, vague mist hung above the snow-dappled rims. The morning breeze had an indefinite chill. Indian summer was dying, and winter, creeping now, would be pouncing any day.

"We'll drift out to the Barnes place," he decided.

Then he stopped. Three men had emerged from the Keystone Bar across the street. Big Griffith, bare-headed, and tuned up with whisky, stepped out, the sunlight playing like fire on his unshaven jowels. Two of his fighting men were at his heels, one thin as a lath and sharp-nosed, the other swart and chunky.

CHAPTER THREE

Guns of the Turkey Track

GRIFFITH saw Larry and turned to his companion, grinning and making some remark behind a hairy hand. They came across the street. The giant's left jaw was swollen and tinged with yellow.

"You hit me from a sneak yesterday, Sloan," he growled, pausing a dozen feet away. "I'm going to deal you the damnedest licking a man ever receipted for in Montana."

Larry was smiling a little. "Lose your hat, Griffith?" he asked softly.

The giant's glance shifted to the hat on Larry's saddle. "Yeah, what of it?" he sneered unmoved.

"I reckon this one will fit you," Larry remarked, tossing the hat at the giant's feet.

Griffith's heavy lips formed a contemptuous grin. "What if it does?"

"I shot it off your head last night after you and your outfit had spooked our Turkey Track herd," Larry went on with disarming ease.

"That was last night," Griffith spat. "This is another day. Take the gun-weight off you and put up your hands, fella."

"I'm gettin' around to that," Larry remarked. "We buried one of my riders this morning. A bullet put him under the stampede. He was a good man—too good to let his murder pass, without takin' talley for him."

Griffith's eyes slitted, and he took time to measure Dobe Darnell with more care. He saw only a little, blinking man and felt reassured.

"Call your play, cowboy," he snarled menacingly.

Larry's boots were slightly spread, his long arms hanging loosely at his sides. "I'm fightin' you, Griffith," he rasped, his voice suddenly vibrant. "But not with fists. Reach! An' reach fast—killer!"

Griffith's big body had hunched forward. He coiled a trifle at the knees. His yellowish eyes were flat and deadly, as he set himself for the draw.

In that moment a girl stepped from the door of a store thirty feet back of Bill Griffith, a basket of groceries on her arm. A girl in a homespun dress, a little brightly patterned scarf around her neck, a sunbonnet hiding her face.

She halted suddenly as though sensing her peril. She was directly in Larry's line of fire, shielded only partly by Griffith's bulk.

Big Griffith saw Larry's eyes shift a trifle and caught the flicker of horror in

his eyes. "Wait!" Larry said frenziedly. "There's a girl in line. Wai——"

But Griffith, realizing his advantage, was not waiting. He went for his guns, his eyes flaring.

Larry had been steeled for that move with such intentness that now his muscles responded automatically. His own gun came streaking out. His draw was so fast that Big Griffith flinched. He had been beaten, and he knew it.

But Larry's gun hesitated before it completed its upward arc. Griffith was not hesitating. His .45's came tilting up, his massive thumbs rolling the hammers.

Then, with the stunning rapidity of a lightning flash, a bullet cut the giant down. He reeled aside, his own weapons roaring futilely into the ground. He landed on his face. There was an ugly hole in his temple. His body barely quivered.

"Stand quiet, you two heel dogs," Dobe Darnell's brittle voice rang out. "Pull your claws wide of your artillery."

Dobe stood there, a gun in each fist, a thin wisp of vapor floating from the muzzle of one.

The two, their hands hooked over their holsters, crouched an instant, then slowly relaxed, their gaze held more by Dobe's stony face than by his guns.

"Sorry to bring down game you had flushed," Dobe remarked without looking at Larry. "But I was standin' far enough aside so that the girl wasn't in my way."

She was gone now. The basket, its contents spilled over the sidewalk, lay there. She evidently had fled into the store.

"Drag out and don't look back," Larry told the two gunmen.

THE town was cautiously coming to life. Soon they were surrounded by a silent crowd. Milt Warnack came hurrying from the court house and pushed through curiously.

He uttered a curse of disbelief when he saw the body. "Who did it?" he asked incredulously.

Someone answered hesitantly, "the leetle feller."

Warnack looked at Larry, then at Dobe Darnell. He was shaken. He had believed Big Griffith the match of any man with guns or fists.

"We'll be in the Keystone for the next ten or fifteen minutes—in case anybody wants us," Larry said bleakly. "I'm buyin' a drink for a man who just did this range a big favor."

The crowd let them through in silence. Then it broke up suddenly—too suddenly. Something that overcame even morbid curiosity was at work among the citizens of Paleyville.

Larry and Dobe had downed a drink in silence, when a strapping, rugged man with a graying mustache came in. He had a sheriff's star pinned on his worn black vest.

"Come on boys," he said impersonally. "I'm Ben Burke, sheriff of the county."

"There was a woman in my line of fire," Larry said moodily, setting his glass down. "Dobe did it to save me."

"Milt Warnack is filin' a murder charge against the little fellow," the sheriff explained. "He tried to file against both of yuh. But only one shot was fired. I only want one of yuh."

"I warned Griffith to wait until the woman moved away," Larry argued. "He saw his chance for a sure kill. He had me dead to rights, if Dobe hadn't shaded him to the trigger."

Ben Burke considered that. "If you can prove it, I might refuse to issue a warrant," he said slowly. "I don't carry any mail for gunies like Big Griffith. He was long overdue. And Milt Warnack might pull plenty of weight with some folks in this county, but to me he's only another citizen."

Dobe exhibited one of his rare, thin smiles. "Let's go, Larry," he advised. "We'll get a square shake from the sheriff, at least. There were plenty of witnesses peekin' from doors an' windows. They'll back us up."

They went to the sheriff's office which adjoined the jail at the rear of the courthouse. Milt Warnack was there with the two gunmen.

"These cowboys claim self-defense, Warnack," Ben Burke commented.

"It was murder," Warnack barked. "They warped my foreman into a crossfire, and this little skunk shot him in the back."

"Did you see the killin'?"

"No, but Slim Mills and Cougar did."

The sheriff turned to Larry. "I'll give you a chance to bring in any reputable witnesses you can find to back you up. I'll hold your pard here awhile."

Larry started out confidently. He went first to the store from which the sunbonneted figure had appeared. The place was abuzz with gossip, but it died as he entered. He peered around for sight of a sunbonnet and homespun dress but was disappointed.

'I'm huntin' witnesses to that trouble in the street," he said. "Some of you folks saw it, I reckon."

There was uneasy silence. He pinned down a clerk. "Did you see it?"

The clerk backed away. "No. I didn't see a thing."

Larry stared around, frowning, then went out. He canvassed other stores and saloons on both sides of the streets within range of the scene. His confidence evaporated. The citizens of Paleyville had suddenly gone deaf, dumb and blind.

"Warnack's got the fear in 'em," he frowned, that sense of futility upon him stronger than ever. "They're leery of him and his killers."

He was conscious of furtive, half-fearful inspection from everywhere. People were avoiding him as they would a plague.

"Yellow," he spat aloud, his voice carrying.

Then he sighted the sun-bonneted feminine figure, a block away. She was hurrying toward a buckboard. The basket was on her arm again. Larry hesitated an instant, disliking the thought of compelling a woman to testify. But he owed it to Dobe to try.

She had just adjusted her skirt and settled on the sagging seat beside a worn-looking man of middle age in patched overalls. Somehow Larry knew that she was aware of his coming, and shrinking from the meeting, for she kept her head turned.

The man saw Larry, and apprehension flared in his eyes. He reached hurriedly for the reins.

"Wait a minute," Larry rasped grimly, pushing the man's hand back. "I'm apologizin' for——"

Then he saw the face beneath the sunbonnet. It was Ann Barnes'.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Friend in Need

LARRY stared, then his face lighted. "I didn't recognize you without the jeans an' that old hat," he said.

But the older man spoke hoarsely. "Stand back, mister. We're in a hurry."

Larry's face slowly hardened, and he moved back. The girl stared appealingly, and he could see the struggle that was mirrored in her eyes.

"Wait, Dad," she exclaimed suddenly, huskily.

Her father glared, and there was stark apprehension in his eyes. "What yuh want, stranger?" he growled.

Larry was curt in the face of the father's hostility. "One of my riders is facing a murder charge. It was self-defense,

in a way. I was wondering if either of you saw that killing awhile ago?"

"No," the father blurted out. "I tell yuh, no!"

But Ann Barnes made a weary gesture. "You're wrong, dad," she said faintly. "I saw it—saw it all."

Her father became frantic. "Don't you be a fool, Ann," he pleaded desperately. "Don't go rilin' up Mil—don't get mixed up in a cowboy brawl. Think of the children. Think of mom, an' the baby that's comin'."

Her little chin had set. "I know," she flashed. "Milt Warnack will burn us out, run us out of the range. Well, let him. I'm sick of being a coward." She turned to Larry. "You're hunting a witness aren't you? I'm sorry I tried to run away. Help me down. I'll go with you."

Larry lifted her from the wagon. The nearness of her in that brief moment brought a strange humility to him.

She looked at him with a brave smile that he knew masked stark fear that was not for herself, but for others. "Where do we go?" she asked.

The father, with a groan, followed them but he remained outside of the sheriff's office.

Milt Warnack's face blackened when he saw Larry's companion. He stood by in silence as Ann Barnes talked to Ben Burke. Her voice was low but steady, and she ignored the silent threat of the horse-faced rancher.

"An' Sloan called out for Griffith to wait, huh?" the sheriff questioned her. "He warned Griffith you was in the way of bullets?"

"Yes," she nodded. "But Griffith didn't wait. He drew his guns. Mr. Sloan did not attempt to fire. Then Mr. Sloan's friend drew—oh, he drew so fast—and fired."

Burke slanted a glance at Milt Warnack. "What about it?"

"She's lyin'," Warnack snarled. "She's a friend of these Texas killers. Don't forget that two of my riders will testify that it was a frame-up. Their word is as good as this girl's."

"Not with me, it ain't," the sheriff snorted. "They don't belong in this country. They're not our kind. An' I think I could rake together a jury that would agree with me. I'm not servin' any murder warrant on Darnell. There's no evidence of murder. If the coronor disagrees, then I'll act. But there won't be any inquest until tomorrow, because he's out of town."

Warnack was pale with rage. "We'll serve it ourselves, then," he gritted. "And you won't need a jury to try the case."

He led his gunmen to the door. There he turned to look at the girl. In spite of his anger he had presence enough to refrain from voicing the threat that lay deep and malignant in his eyes. But Larry saw the girl flinch.

Larry extended a hand to the sheriff. "I was beginnin' to believe that Warnack had the whole range under his heel," he said. "You're the first ray of sunshine in a long time."

"If the county would give me a few deputies with guts, I'd make it too hot for these gun-stompers that he carries on his payroll," Ben Burke sighed. "But they won't. Warnack, bein' a heavy tax-payer, sees to that. An election comes up soon. After that a new face will be at this desk, son. You boys want to be long gone before that happens. Fact is I wouldn't let sundown ketch yuh within as many miles as your horses can hammer out."

Larry moved nearer to Ann Barnes, who was adjusting her scarf with waxen, shaking fingers. Dark dread gripped her.

"We've got a lot of reasons for staying," Larry said slowly. "One is that we don't aim to have anyone suffer for helping us."

"That takes a load off my mind," Ben Burke remarked. "I was figurin' on visitin' the Barnes place for awhile myself. But maybe I won't be needed."

Larry took the girl's arm. "I'm seein' you home," he said gaily. "An' Dobe will ride herd on both of us."

Some of the dread died. He felt hope and relief course through her again.

NOW that his daughter had defied the lightning, Jim Barnes bucked up somewhat, though he was pessimistic as he tooled the buckboard out from Paleyville toward the needle buttes against the loom of the Shoshones. Larry and Dobe flanked the wheelers.

"We'll send Lucy an' all you kids to town," Barnes decided. "Blast it, why did it have to be us that started the ball rollin'? Warnack's been waitin' for some of us shoestring ranchers to look cross-eyed at him so it would give him an excuse to stomp us."

"Anybody who fathers a daughter like that should be able to take some stompin'," Dobe said in a burst of speech. "She looks a lot like you."

"Don't hooraw me, fella," Barnes sniffed. "Ann's the spittin' image of her mother. Got her mom's nerve too. I'll have trouble gettin' Lucy to hit for town. She loaded guns for me more than once in the old days when yuh had to shoot straight to hold your hair in this country. That was before we had any kids to think about. A pack of kids has made cowards of better men than me. We got five now, an' another right over the hill. Ann's the oldest. Twenty-two, an' she's the best damned cowhand a man ever had."

Larry questioned him about Tobasco Tim, but Jim Barnes knew little. He recalled seeing Larry's father in Paleyville the previous April, and recounted vague gossip that Tobasco Tim was looking for range, and that he had been dickering with Milt Warnack. But he had dropped out of sight and mind.

The Barnes spread was small, but neat and orderly; the log walls of the ranch house, the corrals and barn gleaming with whitewash. The cavvy was meager, and there was a patent air of struggle for existence.

Three pop-eyed children, ranging from four to ten, descended on them as they drove up. Speck, restraining such youthful exuberance, came slapping his hand-me-down boots, said "Howdie," and spat non-commitally in the dust.

Lucy Barnes came to the door and kissed Ann. Barring twenty years, mother and daughter were of a pattern. In spite of everything, Lucy Barnes still had dark-eyed, quiet beauty. Hard years had only made definite her calm sweetness of character.

"Got good news for yuh, Mom," her husband said with a cough. "You an' the kids are goin' to visit Sue Burke in town for a few days. I was talkin' to Sheriff Ben this mornin', an' he said it might be smart if you stayed there till the baby come, so. . . ."

Larry rode away with Speck while they were still trying to over-ride the mother's intuitive suspicions. Speck led him up a gloomy, brush-choked canyon, and finally halted at the edge of a cutbank overlooking a purling stream.

The skeleton of a horse, stripped by buzzards, lay there above the water-line, low at this season. Larry spent an hour covering the vicinity, but found nothing.

"The horse likely was carried down from above," he finally mused. "The crick would be runnin' high with the spring thaw."

They returned to the ranch, Larry moody, realizing that all this was getting him no nearer a solution of his problem.

The buckboard was loaded and the

mother ready with the three small children. "Climb in Speck," the father said gruffly, pointing to the seat. "An' don't go hellin' around in Paleyville tonight. Stay with your mother."

Speck looked around, the significance of all this striking him for the first time. "Like hell I will!" he scowled. "Where's Ann? She kin drive that wagon."

The mother spoke up. "Come, Speck. Ann is needed here." She kissed her husband bravely. "Ann can load guns. I did it. I'd do it now if it wasn't—"

Her voice failed her. Speck, with sullen eyes, climbed into the seat, savagely kicked off the brake and snapped the reins.

"All right, you selfish sons," he spat back. "I'll drive 'em to town. But damned if I'll stay there! You're expectin' Warnack and his gunies to call. You ain't foolin' me."

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun Siege

THEY sat in darkness in the log ranch. Ann had cooked a meal before sundown. At dusk her father had opened the corral to let the horse string scatter down the creek out of range of possible bullets. With the cookstove cold the chill of the night crept into the place. Jim Barnes sucked at a dead pipe, and Larry felt the desire for a cigarette, but did not want to risk the flare of a match.

"This ain't findin' us a place to winter the herd," Dobe reminded him softly as they sat against a wall.

Larry did not answer for a time. "Humans rate above cattle," he pointed out. "And it's Warnack we're fighting. That may lead us where we want to go. I've got a plan. If we can take Warnack alive, I aim to make him talk."

"Alive?" Dobe remarked moodily. "We'll be lucky to live out the night ourselves if they clamp on us. They're four to one, if their cow crew throws in with the gunmen, and we've got the girl to look out for. I'm hopin' they won't try it. Fact is I don't think they will."

"You're wrong," Larry breathed. "Listen!"

The roll of hoofs suddenly boomed through the night. They drummed abruptly louder.

Then, with appalling savagery, guns began tonguing, rifles that hammered bullets into the log walls until the building trembled. That malignant promise in Milt Warnack's eyes had born quick fruit.

Larry drove toward where he knew Ann was sitting, and pushed her down. "Hug the floor," he rasped above the uproar. "They'll empty out in a second an' be reloadin' as they close in to fire the buildings."

The deadly, leaden sleet thinned, then stuttered out, giving way to the increasing rataplan of galloping hoofs.

The three men were moving to window, clicking shells into chambers, laying belt guns at their feet for secondary use.

Peering against the starline Larry saw spur-maddened horses loom up. They were coming in a mad rush upon a ranch which, for all they knew, now housed the cowering survivors of women and children. They were coming to finish the job.

That thought was in Larry's mind as he lifted his carbine, and pushed the black, oily tube over the sill.

Then Jim Barnes' .40-90 coughed like thunder in the room, and the scream of a dying gunman made answer. Larry, his unshaven cheek muzzling a recoiling stock, opened up, notching his sight breast-high beneath the hats that rose against the stars.

In the kitchen he heard the methodical slam of Dobe's carbine. Vaguely he realized that Ann Barnes was at his side, lancing fire and lead from a six-shooter.

The oncoming line seemed to recoil and reel back as from a tangible barrier. Saddles emptied magically, horses went down. Men cursed hysterically.

Milt Warnack's voice rose in a frenzied scream. "Down! Down! They're slaughtering us!"

The shapeless forms of men and horses wheeled away and the darkness swallowed them. They left four huddled bodies there in the ranch yard. One lay twisting and groaning, racked by agony.

LARRY had emptied his carbine and one .45. He turned and pushed the girl away from the window. "Bite the dust again," he said hoarsely. "They've stopped running. They'll give us hell from now on."

There was an interval of silence. They could hear faint, gritted voices, monosyllabic words, and sinister movement as the killers found cover. They were bellying behind the lower rail of the corral, crouching at the corners of the barn, building breastworks from the woodpile.

Then— "Blast it to 'em. Burn 'em down with lead!" came Warnack's hate-frenzied voice.

The storm of slugs descended on the house once more with a methodical, relentless beat that was more deadly than the greater volume of the first wild attack. The Rocking W gunmen were firing slow, notching low, seeking out the windows and chinks with their lead.

A richochetting slug clipped a strip from the brim of Larry's hat as neatly as sharp scissors. He heard the girl gasp, and he bent close with a groan of apprehension.

"It's nothing," she breathed. "Only a scratch from a sliver."

He covered her with his long body and shielded her until the first fury of the fusilade had passed.

Then he moved to the window, marked a gun flash down by the corral and hammered three bullets into the spot. There was the faint sound of a twisting, threshing body. Larry dove aside as the return blast came, every enemy on that side battering at the window with bullets.

Dobe Darnell's gun rolled a quick staccato from the kitchen and somewhere a wounded man cursed frenziedly. The metal hail instantly shifted on Dobe's position. Finally it dwindled and fell to intermittent crackling.

"Father?" the girl called anxiously.

"Still alive an' struttin'," Jim Barnes boasted from across the room. "We've whittled 'em aplenty. But there's still seven or eight left."

Larry spoke up. You all right, Dobe?"

No reply came from the kitchen.

Ann uttered a dry sob of horror. Larry crawled into the kitchen, and located Dobe Darnell, still on his knees at a window, his gun pointing over the sill. At Larry's touch that grim, crouching form began to slide. Larry eased it to the floor. He stooped, placing an ear to Dobe's chest.

Then he returned silently to the living room and resumed his post.

"He was still there, his gun in his hands and aimed at the wolves," Larry rasped. "A man couldn't ask for a better way to go out."

The sobs of a girl sounded Dobe Darnell's requiem.

LARRY heard sounds beyond the barn, the creaking of wagon wheels, hoarse, subdued orders. He crawled to Jim Barnes' side. "We're about at the end of our string," he breathed. "They're going to burn us out with a fire-devil. They're loading hay on a wagon."

"They've been a long time thinkin' of that moss-covered stunt," Barnes growled. "But they're out of luck. I'm an old injun fighter, feller, an' I built this shack on a little knoll. They got to shove it uphill from any direction they try, an' before

they can get it close enough to do damage we'll have 'em picked off."

Larry went back, listening uneasily. He hoped Barnes was right. But he knew Milt Warnack's cunning.

The preparations went on. Finally the wagon was pushed into view around the barn, piled high with hay. Larry could see its vague bulk little more than a hundred yards away.

Then, at a sharp cry from Milt Warnack, guns began beating savagely at the house again, sending the three to the floor for protection. After a moment Larry arose and chanced a glimpse. The hay wagon had not moved. He was puzzled.

Abruptly the firing died. Milt Warnack's grating laugh of hatred rolled out. "I know you're in there Sloan. Say your prayers. In a minute you'll be roastin'."

There was the vague reflection of a match from the rear of the hayload.

"Heave! Warnack shouted.

The wagon began to roll slowly. Larry and Jim Barnes hammered bullets under it steadily. But the wagon came on. A red tongue of flame licked over its top, and the hay became a roaring mound that lighted up the scene in lurid crimson.

"There's nobody back of it," the girl cried wildly.

Then Larry cursed. "They've outsmarted us. It's being pulled by a rope. They've tied their saddle ropes together an' ran a line across the knoll under cover of that last gun-blast. Most of 'em are down on the left of the house, draggin' the fire-devil up from the right."

Larry could see the shadowy outline of the rope which ran past the rear corner of the house. It was too indefinite a target to cut with a bullet.

The fire-devil had become a blazing inferno. Its heat beat through the window as it lurched slowly but inexorably toward the house.

Larry leaped to the opposite opening. He could hear men panting there. The glow of the fire high-lighted a heap of timber that had been dragged in for winter firewood. The men who were hauling at the rope were sheltered behind it. Bullets could not reach them.

Two rifles were firing occasionally at the house. The remainder of Warnack's crew were on the rope.

Larry strode into the kitchen. The red glow made plenty of light now. He saw a meat knife hanging from a nail over the stove. Seizing it, he jerked the kitchen door open.

Ann had followed him, and now grasped his arm. "What are you going to do?" she panted.

"Cut that rope. It's our only chance."

"You'll be killed."

He laughed mirthlessly, and leaped out. Two strides, and someone yelled an alarm. The pair of rifles shifted on him at once. From the woodpile more guns opened up. The wagon halted as men dropped the rope and joined in.

Three strides and he was sawing at the line. A slug raked his ribs, staggering him, hammering the breath from him. The rope was tough, the knife dull. His arm dropped limply, drilled by a rifle bullet.

Then the line parted. As he turned to stagger toward the house he knew he could never hope to make it through the bullets that filled the air past him.

But a new sound of rolling hoofs welled up. Then a shrill, high-pitched ululation that carried like the hunting cry of the lobo wolf. It was caught up and hurled through the crimson night from more throats. The fighting cry of Texas trail men!

THE storm of lead suddenly lifted from Larry. Guns began chattering frenziedly in another direction. The burning wagon remained where it had halted, a

giant torch that bathed in flickering glow a scene of red fury.

Crouching riders, six-shooters spitting, swept into view past the house. Larry saw Reb Turnbull's lean form and caught the glint of his eyes in the red reflection. He identified other sun-darkened faces by the way they sat the saddle.

His Turkey Track riders rolled over the woodpile. Men scattered from it like rabbits. Roaring guns lashed them. Some fell in full flight, tumbling grotesquely. One or two got through into the darkness beyond. Then the Turkey Track men, riding like demons, veered around the ranch guns cracking as they cleared the shadows of lurking killers.

After a time the Turkey Track men came riding up. With them was Speck Barnes. "I told you I'd come back, Larry," Speck panted. "I found your bunch in Paleyville, huntin' you. I shore high-tailed 'em out here."

"We said we'd come to town if you wasn't back at the wagon by dark," Reb Turnbull remarked, swinging down. "An' I reckon we got here just when the boot was beginnin' to pinch."

Larry, gripping his wounded arm, walked down among the sinister circle of sprawled forms around the woodpile. A wounded gunman tried to crawl away. Another moaned.

Larry sought out a black-coated form that lay face up. It was Milt Warnack. "Dead," Larry said. "He was lucky."

Then Warnack stirred a little. His skull had been clipped by a bullet. When he came around he stared into a face as remorseless as fate. Larry's arm was slung in a bandage.

"As soon as you can set a horse I'm hangin' you, Warnack," he said bleakly. "Do you want to tell what happened to Tobasco Tim Sloan? You murdered him."

Warnack, facing his doom, remained venomous. "I'll never tell," he said.

"You gave my father a fake deed to the Rocking W, and your brother-in-law never recorded it," Larry went on. "Then you murdered him, destroyed the deed, and there was no record that he had ever paid you the money. That's my guess. I think it's correct."

"You're good at guessing," Warnack gritted. "Keep on. It won't buy you anything. Not even grass for your herd."

Larry turned to Jim Barnes. "Do you know where his crooked brother-in-law lives?"

Barnes stared. "Yeah. He's got a place jest this edge of Paleyville. White cottage with weather-boardin', sets back to the right of the road just beyond the crick bridge."

"Take a couple of the boys and bring him out here, Reb" Larry rasped. "Grab him on the quiet. Maybe he'll talk when he gets a rope around his neck."

Milt Warnack cursed. "Never mind," he spoke up suddenly. "That rat would go yellow and beg for mercy. He took his split of the money. Let him pay the piper, too. Sloan, you'll find your father's body up Steamboat Canyon, about eight miles where it runs through a malpais of boulders. You'll have to hunt, for I dropped him into a crevice and rolled boulders in. I shot him while me and him was lookin' over the Rocking W line fences up there. I rolled his horse into the crick, which was runnin' high."

Larry stood up. "Bring a rope somebody," he said harshly.

But strapping Sheriff Ben Burke pushed into the circle. "I saw Speck leadin' these buckaroos out of town, so I tagged along," the sheriff explained. "I rode slow, for I didn't want to get here too quick when I heard the shootin'. But the law has got to be observed sometime, Sloan. I figure the state ought to stand

the expense of a hang-rope for this tarantula."

"Yes." Ann's voice spoke softly at Larry's side. "You've had enough of killing. Too much. I hope you never have to do any more."

They stood looking at each other, and Larry's face lost its frozen hate.

Young Speck Barnes stared at them. "Ain't it hell how a she-woman kin haze us men around," he snorted. "She's got Larry roped an' busted. I betcha she'll be a-marryin' him before he knows it."

Reb Turnbull kicked him violently. "You talk too much for a button," he growled. "Come away from here—an' all the rest of you bug-eyed longhorns."

"Damn yuh!" Speck's voice floated back. "I'll chaw yore ear off fer that, Turnbull!"

Larry smiled as he turned again to Ann. . . .

THE END

TRIGGER TROUBLE

A Big Novelette about

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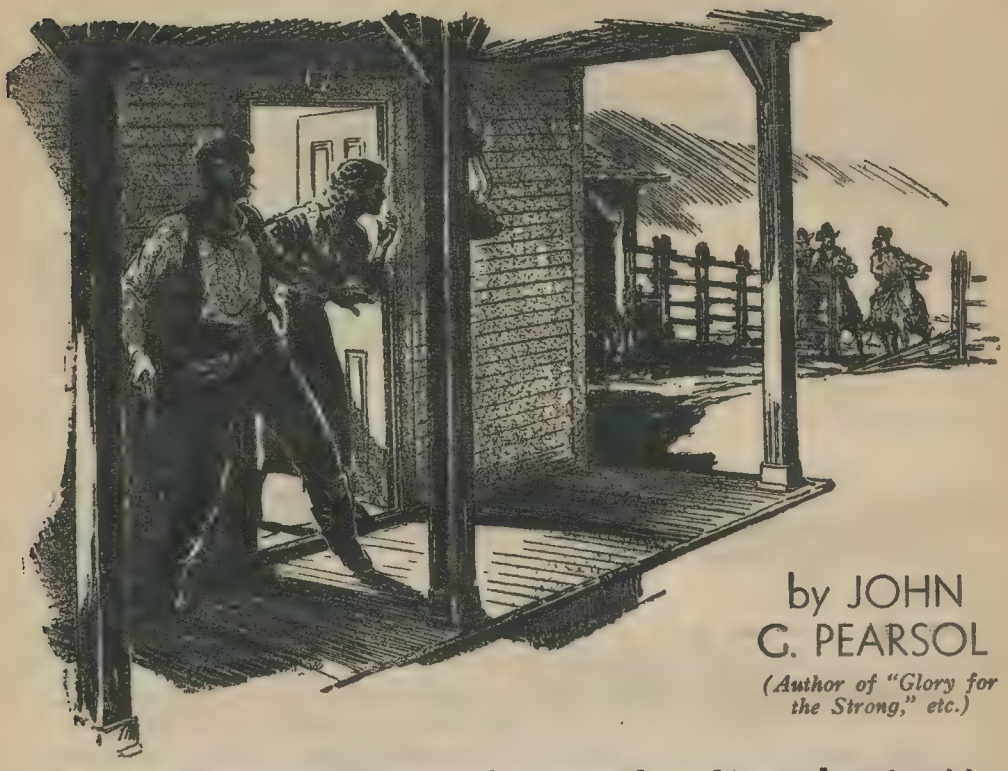
DEAD MAN'S GUNS



by JOHN G. PEARSOL

(Author of "Glory for the Strong," etc.)

Sundown Slim, with a lawman's noose about his neck, set out to collect a blood-debt from the man who had killed his father!

OLD Jim Corling looked up. The shuffling steps of two men sounded just outside the door of his hot, filthy cell in the Mexican jail. The jailer unlocked the cell door, and shoved Big Bill Danvers in with Jim Corling. Then the jailer went away again, the sounds of his sandals shuffling off down the corridor, dying away gradually.

Old Jim Corling looked up at Big Bill. "Anything new?" he asked, anxiety in his voice.

Bill Danvers scowled, drew his shaggy brows down over his jet eyes. He paced back and forth across the narrow cell.

"I got it fixed," he said, avoiding old Jim's anxious eyes. "Yuh know how crooked these Mexes are? Well—I got it fixed with that fat-bellied general. He says all they want is somethin' to sorta satisfy folks. They gotta kill somebody, see, or *pretend* they kill somebody. He says if one of us confess to killin' that jasper, then the other one can go free right now. Then he'll fake an execution. They'll load the rifles with blanks an' when they shoot, the gent plays dead, an' that night he c'n ride away, free too."

Jim Corling studied Danvers' big, pacing form. "Well?" he finally asked.

Bill Danvers stopped, threw his giant arms out in an expressive gesture. "Here's the play," he said. "It really *looks* like you did it, more than me, so—"

"But you did kill him!" reminded old Jim softly.

Bill Danvers nodded, sneaked a swift glance toward the corridor. "Not so loud," he whispered. "It's better that you take the play because it points to you,

see? An' besides, they might not pull it off for a week or more. Then if I stay here, me bein' the one who knows where that Yaqui gold is, Larson might beat us to it. You stay. I'll shake my hocks an' scoop up the gold, then I'll pick yu' up on my way back." He leaned forward, peered intently at old Jim. "Ain't it better that way?" he asked.

Jim Corling studied Big Bill's black eyes, but he didn't see anything but black jet that gave off a sort of glittery shine in the semi-darkness of the cell.

"Is this on the level, Bill?" he asked softly. "All this about a fake execution?"

Big Bill sucked in his breath, looked at Jim Corling with blank amazement on his big, dark-hewn features. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Here we are —two pardners in on a deal. We git stopped in a little mess that we couldn't help. An' when I offer the businesslike way out of it you ask, 'is it on th' level'! Listen Jim, I wanna tell yuh this right now. I—"

Old Jim Corling smiled, put up his hand. "Hold it, Bill," he said softly, "I jus' asked yuh. If this is the way we ought to do it, she's *bueno* with me. I jus' wanted to be kinda sure I didn't git bumped off for a killin' I didn't do, that's all. Now go ahead; tell 'em I'm their huckleberry, an' I'll swear to it."

Bill Danvers stepped forward, reached out and shook Jim Corling's hand. "That's th' ticket, Jim," he said. "Yuh see it's the quickest way to git done what we was gonna do."

HE stepped to the cell door, sent a call down the corridor. The jailer came up and Big Bill talked to him in Spanish. The jailer went away again.

"Knowin' their lingo is handy," he said to Jim Corling. "You ought to learn it sometime."

Corling grunted, listening to the sounds of marching feet coming down the corridor. "Yeah," he said, "I wish I did know th' lingo. Mebby I'll learn it sometime."

Big Bill smiled broadly as he watched Jim Corling go out into the corridor and march away with the soldiers. He waited at the bars till the jailer came back again. This time the jailer had Danvers' personal effects with him. He handed Big Bill a belt hung with two guns, let him have his big black hat and blanket roll.

"Your *caballo* is in the yard," he said. "Your fellow countryman has confessed to killing Manuel Cervantez. You are free."

Then Bill Danvers walked out of the hot jail. He mounted his horse and rode away. . . .

Back in the jail, old Jim Corling listened to an interpreter in the military court of General Ortega.

"You confess to the killing of Captain Manuel Cervantez?"

Old Jim nodded. They spoke a lot of Spanish that old Jim didn't understand. They didn't bother to interpret only that which was of vital importance to him. Lot of foolish rigmarole over a fake hearing, thought old Jim.

"You will be shot," the interpreter said, "as the sun falls." He looked at his watch. "That will be in about an hour."

Big Bill should have waited, old Jim thought. They were going to pull this off right quick.

"Do you have a last request?" the interpreter asked.

"No," said old Jim, "I'm satisfied." And he smiled. Actors, these Mexicans, right up to the last. Pretending this was the real McCoy.

Some soldiers came in and Jim went back to his cell again. He spent about forty-five minutes writing in a little red book. Then the soldiers came again. They marched him outside, took everything out of his pockets. They took some old let-

ters and the little red book old Jim had written in, and Jim wanted to tell the damn fool he didn't want to lose those things. There was a letter there from his son, and the little red book was his diary. But maybe they'd give them back tonight, when they let him go. And old Jim thought he saw now why they were pulling this at sundown, instead of sunrise. It'd be dark pretty soon.

Jim stood against the stone wall. He waved the officer back who came toward him with a handkerchief. The soldiers raised their rifles. Old Jim smiled inwardly. He would have to make this look real; he'd have to stagger and fall and lay still.

The officer spoke sharply. Sound and fire belched from the gun muzzles. Old Jim Corling staggered back, shook like a giant hand had smitten him. For a brief, horrible instant an expression of awful surprise, of terrible realization flashed into old Jim's face. Then he sagged, fell to the ground and lay still.

BIG BILL DANVERS encountered two of the biggest things in his life not long after he lied his way out of the jail in Palomas and left Jim Corling there to die in his place. Bill Danvers, always accustomed to being poor, discovered that the *padre* who had told him and old Jim of the hidden Yaqui wealth had told the truth, and Big Bill came out of the mountains a rich man—a very rich man.

Folks looked up to Bill Danvers now. He was wealthy, powerful. He discovered he could have most anything he wanted, simply by saying he wanted it. Big Bill Danvers thought a hell of a lot more of Bill Danvers than he used to. He not only thought more of himself, but he actually convinced himself that Bill Danvers was about the slickest thing between the Pecos and the Rockies. He acted the part.

He gloried in the fact that big ranchers respected him. He bought land, put cattle on it. He hired top hands, men who were so much better than Bill Danvers that they wouldn't have taken a drink with him, if he hadn't been a rich man. But even the men he called his hands, the ranchers who respected him, the folks who talked in whispers about the great Mister Danvers, didn't have the remotest idea that Big Bill wasn't all that he pretended to be. For Big Bill was a good actor. He'd proven that back in Palomas, when he made Jim Corling believe the tale about a fake execution.

His wealth grew. His lands stretched farther than a man could ride in two whole days. His cattle couldn't be counted. He was considered wise, good, and respectable. He went to church on Sunday and dropped more gold pieces in the collection box than a puncher could earn in six months. He denounced wickedness, and exalted goodness. He preached honesty and truth, and the women for miles around told their youngsters that if they were good, some day they might grow up to be as big, as strong, as manly, as Mister Danvers.

For five years, all things had come to Bill Danvers except love—a wife to share with him that palatial ranch-house that rested so regally at the entrance to the Danvers lands. Just one thing more, and Big Bill could feel that he had made his artificial shell of respectability complete. And one day, with superb confidence, he rode his great black horse to the gates of the tiny ranch many miles from his own house to confer an honor upon Susan Blakely by asking her to become his wife.

The very gates of the ranch yard seemed to open wide with welcome as Big Bill pranced his big black through them. William Danvers was a princely figure, with his black broadcloth suit, his expensive boots, his white Stetson that

cost him more than you'd pay for a fine horse. His black eyes danced with the lights of inner excitement as he swung from his silver embroidered saddle and mounted the ranch-house steps. He wanted Susan Blakely. Why shouldn't she marry him. Wasn't he wealthy, handsome? Hadn't he gotten everything he had wanted, simply by saying he had wanted it?

Bill Danvers took a quick look about the run-down ranch as he heard footsteps coming toward the door in answer to his knock. He saw no one. He'd ask Susan to sit on the porch with him, where he could wave grandly toward the vast acres that were his own.

"Susan," Big Bill said sonorously, his deep voice impressive, after they were seated on the porch. "I have come to you after five years of looking—" Big Bill waved his hand—"over this entire country. I have met many girls. But of them all you are the one that fills my head at all times. I see you when I am home and you are here. I talk to you when you are far away from me. So, Susan, I want you to be with me, to come and be mistress of my home. I want you to marry me."

BILL DANVERS took his eyes away from the distant hills, looked at the profile that was presented to him. He saw the softness of the girl's features, the warm curve of her lips. And for the first time in five years Big Bill Danvers felt the icy finger of fear. This Susan Blakely, poor and orphaned though she was, was not for an ordinary man. What if she didn't—?

"That was a pretty speech," said Susan. "I'm taking it that you meant to say that you loved me. I'm honored, Mister Danvers. But I'm afraid—"

"Stop right there," said Big Bill. "You're going to say that you're afraid that you don't love me enough. Of course you don't. Not right now. But you will." Big Bill waved his hand again. "When you can sit on the porch of my ranch-house as we are sitting now on yours, and can look and cannot see far enough to see land that does not belong to you, it will be different. When you have everything that money can buy—fine clothes, jewels, servants, the things you are bound to want—then you will love the man who has given these things to you."

"I'm sorry," said Susan. "But it can never be. Money doesn't mean a thing to me."

"That's because you've never had it," Bill Danvers said. "You've never tasted the sweet of it. After—"

"I'm sorry, Mister Danvers." There was a certain flat finality in Susan Blakely's voice that made Big Bill feel like he used to, five years ago, when he didn't have a nickel, when men didn't think Big Bill was so much.

It infuriated him. Not so much the girl's voice, or what she said, but how it made Big Bill feel. He rose to his full height. His black eyes were afire.

"You mean to tell me—" he began.

"That it can never be," said Susan Blakely.

She raised her hand, motioned to a slim, gray-eyed puncher who had come around the end of the bunkhouse. He leaned there nonchalantly, looking at the girl and Danvers on the porch.

"Sundown," she called. "Slim—Mr. Danvers wants his horse. Will you bring it, please?"

Bill Danvers fumed. He was being dismissed, as though he didn't amount to anything! He jerked the reins from the puncher's hand as the slim young fellow brought his big black up to the porch. Big Bill stared for a startled instant into the gray eyes with which this slim gent appraised him. The years flew back, and

Big Bill looked again into gray eyes, sea-green in their depths. The eyes of old Jim Corling, when old Jim searched Big Bill's there in the cell of the jail in Palomas! Big Bill swung up on his mare, sank the spurs into its sides and galloped furiously out of the ranch yard.

"Now what's bitin' him?" Sundown Slim asked Susan Blakely.

"He wanted to marry me."

"Oh," Sundown muttered softly to himself. "The hell he did!" And he looked after Big Bill as he galloped away, watched the dust roll up in his wake.

"Funny," Sundown muttered again, "that's th' first time I ever got a real good look at that gent."

Then he turned abruptly, went into the bunkhouse, pulled a bundle of letters from under the straw mattress of his bunk. He searched them, finally produced an old tin-type, a photo of two men, standing side by side, in front of a tunnel entrance. One was old Jim Corling. The other bore a marked resemblance to Big Bill Danvers. And on the bottom of the photo was scrawled:

Me and my pardner.
Dad.

But nowhere in Sundown Slim's letters and papers could he find the name of this pardner mentioned.

BIG BILL DANVERS was disturbed as he rode his big black furiously into Ruidoso. He slowed at the town's edge, to ride slowly, majestically, through the single dusty street. He dismounted at the post office, went in and took a packet of letters from the gray-haired old man behind the grill.

"By the way, Mister Danvers," the post master, Evans, said, "You bein' a man of wide acquaintance, I wonder do you know a gent named Jim Corling."

Big Bill Danvers' breath stopped in his throat. An icy chill chased up and down his spine. But he kept his eyes glued on the letters in his hand.

"Corling," he managed to mutter as though pondering. "Jim Corling. No. I've never heard that name. Why?"

Danvers' heart pulse pounded furiously in the vein in his temple as he waited.

"I gotta letter for him," said Evans. "Been here a long time. Come about five years ago, th' same time, mighty near, that you showed up in these parts. It's addressed to Señor Jim Corling, junior, an' it's from a General somebody, down in Palomas, Mexico. I kept it a long time, then sent it back to this general. He sent it back to me with a note sayin' it was important an' to try an' locate this Corling gent. It's been here so long now that I gotta do something about it. Open it, or something."

Open it! Big Bill shuddered inwardly, visioned the damming things that letter might say.

"Maybe I can locate him for you," he said. "I'll send out some feelers for him. Don't do anything about it for a while."

And as Bill Danvers walked out of the post office he cursed himself for a fool. If he had only said he knew Jim Corling he could have taken that letter, pretended he would deliver it.

Bill Danvers went up the street, up a set of three steps to a door that had "A. A. Cummings, Attorney at Law" painted over it. He tipped his white hat back, wiped the sweat from his great brow. He seated himself in a chair across the desk from Cummings, looked at the thin faced attorney calculatingly.

"Everybody has a past," he finally said. "Don't they, Cummings."

The lawyer nodded. "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, Mister Danvers. Every one."

"And out of that past," Big Bill went on, "sometimes, things might come to

make most of us very uncomfortable. That is true, isn't it?"

"Quite true, for most of us."

Danvers took a long breath. "A page of my past is about to be turned, so that every one will read it," he said. "It will do no one any good. But it might do me a great deal of harm. I'd give a great deal to keep it from being read."

"Naturally," Cummings studied his fingernails.

There was a deep silence in the little room. Then Big Bill sighed again. "It's a letter," he said. "It's in the post office."

BILL DANVERS waited again. A hint of distaste came into Cummings' eyes. He turned his head away, looked out of the window. And he saw that thing that Cummings wanted more than anything else in the world. He saw a long line of stout cattle, being driven to loading pens at Ruidoso. If he had money, he, Cummings, could have a ranch, cows, money; men working for him.

"And you'd give money to get that letter? Is that what you mean?"

"That's exactly what I mean," said Bill. "When I get that letter, unopened, delivered to me, I'd hand out a thousand dollars."

Cummings smiled. "It would have to be stolen, Danvers," he said, and Big Bill noticed that Cummings had dropped the courtesy of "Mister."

"Stolen from the Government. A man would have to be hired to steal it. That would take much more than a thousand."

"How much more?"

"Fifty times that much. The Government is a big thing. The Government never forgets. The man who robs the Government would have to leave the country. He couldn't go far on much less than that."

Cummings looked down at his fingernails again. "But," he mused, "Maybe the letter isn't that important."

Bill Danvers' face was suffused with red. His black eyes glittered resentfully.

"No," he said, "it's not worth anything near that amount." Then as Cummings shrugged, "But I'll give it—just to save any little embarrassment that might come up."

"We'll write it down," Cummings said. "On receipt of letter addressed to—Jim Corling, I promise to pay to A. A. Cummings fifty thousand dollars cash. This letter is to be stolen from the post office at Ruidoso."

"I'll give you the letter and this receipt when you pay me," Cummings said.

"But why put down there that the letter is to be stolen?"

Cummings smiled. "Suppose we get it," he said. "Suppose it's not just what you expect. Then maybe you wouldn't want to invest that much money in it. But the risk would be just as great. But with this—" Cummings tapped the note—"you'd be involved. You'd pay."

Big Bill sighed again, leaned over and signed the paper.

"Have the money tonight," Cummings said, "in cash, at your house. I'll be out to see you."

Bill Danvers went down the street again. Fifty thousand dollars—plenty of money! Cummings was a crook, all right, but Big Bill didn't know what might be in that letter. It might be worth it, or more.

Big Bill mounted, saw the slim, green-eyed young fellow Susan Blakely had called Sundown Slim coming into town. And Bill wondered why this gent bothered him. His eyes reminded him of Jim Corling. Maybe this was the boy old Jim had mentioned; his son, masquerading under the alias of Sundown Slim.

Big Bill rode slowly out of town. . . .

Sundown Slim stopped in front of the post office, slipped the reins over his

bronc's head and eased stiffly out of the saddle. The top of a letter showed out of his hip pocket as he went in the office. He asked for letters for himself or Susan Blakely.

While Evans turned and looked in some little boxes at the rear of the grill, Sundown Slim pulled the letter from his hip pocket, slipped it into the slot marked "letters."

"Not a thing," said Evans, turning.

"Okay."

And as Slim turned and went out again, Evans looked in the box under the letter chute. It had been empty just a moment before. Now a letter lay there, addressed to Jim Corling, Palomas, Durango, Mexico.

EVANS picked it up, looked with puzzled eyes out the door through which Sundown Slim had gone. He dropped the letter back in the box again, hurried out and called down the street after Slim. "You know a gent called Jim Corling?" Evans asked as Sundown came into the office again.

Sundown Slim's eyes flecked with green. He studied the old man's eyes, nodded slowly.

"Yeah," he said after a while, "I know him."

"Where is he?"

"There's two of 'em," Sundown said. "An old man an' a young gent. Th' old man is in Palomas, Mexico, an' th' young 'un is out here on the range." Slim waved his hand vaguely.

"You send the young gent in here," Evans said. "I gotta letter for him."

Sundown Slim rubbed his boot sole around on the dusty floor, looked down at the dirty circle it was making.

"Well," he said, "He's on a job he can't git away from. But I'll take the letter to him. I know him pretty well. In fact, I jes' mailed a letter for him."

"I reckon that'll be all right," Evans said; then went behind the grill and handed Sundown Slim a yellowed, dust-covered, envelope. Slim took it wordlessly, went out and rode his bronc out of town. Just outside of Ruidoso he stopped, tore open the envelope. He read:

Señor Jim Corling, jr.:

We secured your address from a letter your father carried with him. Your father was executed here for a murder to which he confessed in the presence of witnesses. After his death we read the diary he kept, which will explain why he confessed to a crime which he apparently did not commit. Please be assured that we had no part in this——"

Then Sundown Slim thumbed through a little red leather diary. The entries were numerous, but Slim's eyes froze on the last three.

A padre told me about some hidden gold. Me and Bill are going after it.

We're in jail. A Mex captain was killed. I better not say just yet who did it.

I've confessed to the killing. Bill says that he's got it fixed with the Mex general. They're going to shoot me with blanks and let me go after dark. All a bluff to make the folks around here think that nobody can git away with murder. Bill went on ahead so Larson wouldn't beat us to the gold. Sometimes I wonder if Bill is on the square. He's the one that did the killing.

For a long time, Sundown Slim sat there, motionless on his bronc, gazing southward. A vision seemed to float before his green-flecked eyes, a vision of an old man, standing before a firing squad, waiting for blank cartridges, but getting—

"Bill," Sundown Slim muttered.

And Sundown Slim saw again that picture of Jim Corling and his pardner, standing in front of a mine tunnel entrance. A gent who looked a hell of a lot like Big Bill Danvers!

BIG BILL DANVERS' thick fingers played nervously with the agate charm on his watch chain that ran diagonally across his fancy vest front. Motionless, he sat near a window in his ranchhouse, watched the lights blink out in the bunkhouse far across the ranch yard. Big Bill looked up at the moon, a round silver ball sailing slowly across the sky.

"Full moon," he muttered nervously. "Light enough to see a gent rob a post office."

After a while, the soft sound of hoofs striking yielding sand drifted into the window. Big Bill jerked his great head about, looked at a rider approaching the ranchhouse. Tall, slender, he was; a dark figure outlined in silver.

"Cummings," Big Bill muttered, relief in his voice.

He rose, paced to the door, had it open when the lawyer dismounted.

"You get it?"

Cummings patted his coat pocket.

"I got it," he said, but his voice was tremulous.

"What happened?" Big Bill asked as they went inside, lit a lamp that stood on a desk in a luxuriously furnished room.

"The postmaster's dead," Cummings said. "He had some job or other to do tonight I guess an' came back to the post office while my man was there. There was shooting, and Evans got killed."

Big Bill cursed, paced his ponderous bulk back and forth across the room.

"Well," he said, stopping, "it's all right isn't it? Your man got away. You got the letter."

"It's all right," Cummings said.

"Give me the letter," said Big Bill, reaching out his hand.

Cummings grinned. "The money, Danvers," he said. "The cash!"

Big Bill scowled. He walked over to the safe which was covered by a huge lion skin. He opened the steel door, took out some papers and a bundle of bills. He threw the bills on the table in front of Cummings.

"Put the letter and the note on the table before you pick up the money," he said.

"We trust each other a lot," said Cummings ironically, but reached into his inside coat pocket, put a letter and the note that Big Bill had signed on the table. Big Bill picked up the letter. He looked at the address and gave a barely perceptible start. The envelope was directed to Jim Corling, Palomas, Durango, Mexico.

This was a letter *from* Ruidoso to Jim Corling, at Palomas! He picked it up, opened it by sliding a finger under the envelope flap. Hurriedly read:

> Dear Dad:
>
> About five years and I haven't heard from you. I saw a fellow here today who looked a lot like that pardner you had your picture taken with. What's his name? I was in trouble a couple years ago and just for a little while I'm going by the name of Sundown Slim Smith. Write to me here at Ruidoso. I mailed you a letter from here a long time ago, when I was just riding through here.
>
> Jim.

So Sundown Slim, the fellow at Susan Blakely's ranch, was Jim Corling's son. And Sundown Slim was suspicious, was he, about Jim Corling's pardner's name! Bill Danvers lidded his eyes.

"That the letter you wanted?" Cummings was counting the stack of bills.

"Yeah," said Bill absently, "that's it."

But as he watched Cummings' fingers part the bills he seemed to see something different than the fingers he watched. He looked up at Cummings' down-cast face, then to the open door of the safe. He licked the envelope where a little of the mucilage showed on the flap, sealed it shut again.

He stepped to the safe door, reached in

and took an old Frontier model Colt from it. The initials, "J.C." were carved on the walnut butt. He straightened, stepped one pace closer to Cummings, raised the pistol and fired.

Blood gushed from a hole in the back of Cummings' head as he fell limply to the floor.

BIG BILL picked up the money, thrust it back into the safe. He put the note with his signature on it in his pocket. He ran to the window and fired twice out of it with another gun he had taken from under his arm. He dropped the old gun with the initialed butt, out the window to the ground. Then he dropped the letter out addressed to Jim Corling.

"Help!" he yelled. "Murder!" He cupped his hands as he leaned out the open window, yelled toward the bunkhouse. "Boys! Pile out. A murder! Quick!"

And in just a few seconds, Big Bill Danvers, an expression of horror on his face, was telling a group of punchers how this killing had happened.

"I was talking to Cummings," he told them, "when all of a sudden a gun came over the window sill. A shot flashed out into the room, and Cummings fell dead at my feet." Big Bill spread his arms. "It was awful," he added.

"You see anybody, boss," asked Ringold, the bowlegged ramrod of Danvers' spread.

"Just the hand that held the gun," said Danvers, "I yelled, ran to the window and shot outside. I don't know whether I hit any one or not. Probably not."

"We'll take a look," said Ringold.

He tramped out and came back in a moment with the letter and the gun in his hand. He turned the letter over in his hand, puzzlement in his eyes. He looked at the gun, then up suddenly.

"Say," he said, "this gun has got the same initials on it as the address of this letter."

"The killer dropped 'em," offered another puncher.

"Jim Corling," mused Ringold. "Never heard of him."

"Open it," said Danvers, "maybe there's a clue in the letter."

"Sundown Slim!" said old Ringold. "He's Jim Corling. Says so here. Writin' to his pap. He—he—"

"He dropped the gun and the letter in his hurry to git away," said another puncher. "Got scared when the boss shot."

"Go get the sheriff," said Danvers sternly. "This grieves me deeply. Cummings was a valued and trusted friend."

But as they filed from the room, Big Bill Danvers smiled.

The postmaster was dead; Cummings was dead, and Sundown Slim would be dead pretty soon. And that other letter, if there was one—would go back to the Mex general. He rubbed his hands together.

"Wait boys," he called after the punchers. "I'm going with you. Cummings was my friend. I must see justice done."

And as Bill Danvers hurried out in the wake of his clinking spurred punchers he picked up a packet of papers which he'd laid on the desk as he had taken the money from the safe. He thrust them hurriedly into his pocket and stalked out.

SUSAN BLAKELY watched the transformation on the face of Sundown Slim, slightly ahead of her on the porch. The rays from a lamp inside the window in the ranch-house diffused soft, golden beams that lighted dimly the two figures on the porch.

The lamp light showed Slim's eyes, burning with a fire that glowed fiercely between the lids. Deep, dark, down-curving lines made his mouth a bitter, cynical thing. His voice was hard, cold.

"He lied," Sundown Slim muttered. "Lied like a dirty dog. Fooled my father into confessing to something he did him-

self. He's not fit to live, Susan. An' I gotta kill him."

Susan Blakely slid off the chair, came around and looked at Sundown Slim.

"If anybody did that to my father," she said distinctly, "I'd kill him—when I was *sure* who did it. But you don't know. You're guessing. You think Mister Danvers looks like a fellow who was a pardner to your father. Your father calls this pardner Bill in his diary. That's all you have to go on. Don't stick your head in a noose." Susan Blakely patted Slim's arm as her lips curved into a soft smile again. "I need you, want you here, with me—for a long time."

Then the girl and Slim listened. Their ears turned toward the north, where the pound of hoofs sounded. The girl's eyes widened as she looked at Slim.

Sundown Slim slipped down off the porch, stood out of the direct line of the light that came out of the window.

"You better go in the house," he said to Susan, "till we see who it is."

The girl went up to the door, stepped just inside and stayed there at the door edge. The pound of hoofs drummed up to a roar. A surge of riders speared out of the darkness, drew to a halt in the golden light in front of the ranch-house.

There was Big Bill Danvers, his black broadcloth suit contrasting sharply to the white of his shirt and the cream of his hat. Ringold, the Danvers ramrod, his keen gray eyes watching Sundown Slim. A star glittered on the vest front of Sheriff Carson, the big gent who pushed his bronc forward and eyed Slim in silence for a moment.

"Up late," the sheriff said. "Ain't yuh, Sundown?"

"Kinda," Sundown said. "Sorta late for you gents too, ain't it?"

"Been here all even'?" the sheriff asked.

Sundown Slim studied that circle of faces in front of him.

"No."

"Out ridin', mebby," said a puncher sarcastically.

"By myself," agreed Sundown Slim coldly. "Spring it, gents. What's on yore minds?"

The sheriff whipped a gun up suddenly, covered Sundown Slim.

"Stick 'em up, Slim," he said coldly, "You're under arrest for murder!"

Slowly, Slim elevated his hands. Susan Blakely stepped part way out the door, stopped again as the attitude of that group below her tensed.

"Mebby," said Sundown Slim. "You could tell me who I murdered."

"You killed Cummings, the lawyer," the sheriff said, "over at Danvers' place. You shot him through an open window. Then as you ran away, while Danvers shot at you, you dropped a letter and a gun."

"You're crazy!" Slim took a deep breath. "I still have my gun, an' I'd admire to see the letter I dropped."

STILL keeping his gun trained on Slim, the sheriff reached into the waistband of his trousers, pulled out the walnut-butted pistol with the initials "J.C." on it.

"Your initials," he said. "You're Jim Corling, ain't yuh?" Then before Sundown could answer: "An' here's yore letter, addressed to Jim Corling. Yuh call him dad, an' yore letter says he can address yuh here as Sundown Slim."

Sundown Slim laughed, relieved. "Why, hell's fire, Sheriff," he said. "I mailed that letter in Ruidoso this afternoon!"

"That's what *you* say!" said the sarcastic puncher.

"It ain't postmarked," argued the sheriff. "No use, Slim. You're sunk."

"I can prove it by the postmaster," Slim said. "He saw me mail it."

Big Bill Danvers smiled complacently,

snorted through his great nose. His black eyes lighted with triumph. What a break this was—that Cummings' man had killed the postmaster.

"No use, Sundown," he said loftily. "You can't wiggle out of it *that* way. The postmaster's dead!"

And then Big Bill Danvers was suddenly conscious of curious stares directed at him. He watched Slim, that tense, spring-like figure standing before him. But he felt the sheriff looking at him. He felt the eyes of all his men turned on him. What was it? What was wrong?

"You got a telephone at yore house?" the sheriff asked Danvers.

"No," said Danvers. "I—" Then it broke on him.

"Who told you the postmaster was dead?" The sheriff went on softly. "I saw you gents come into town. I saw you all ride up to my office. You didn't stop any place. I didn't tell you. How'd you know that, Danvers?"

Bill Danvers wet his dry lips. He swallowed very, very hard. "Cummings!" he gasped. "Cummings—he told me."

The sheriff smiled. "Cummings started to your place an hour before the killing," the sheriff said. "He told me where he was going!"

Big Bill took off his hat, wiped the beads of sweat from his brow. So Cummings had played the game safe! He'd headed out of town, waited somewhere out on the desert for his man to find him!

"Who did tell yuh?" asked the sheriff, very softly this time.

"Nobody," said Sundown Slim suddenly, coldly. "He's a dirty rotten skunk—a murderer, Sheriff. He used to be my father's pardner, down in Mexico. He lied his way outa jail. He fooled my father, got him killed. That's my father's gun you got there. I ain't seen it in six years. I—*stop him!*"

Big Bill Danvers was flashing his hand under his armpit. Danvers' gun glinted in the light.

Sundown Slim swished his hands holsterward. A gun blazed at his hip. And Big Bill Danvers crashed off his plunging black, landed soddenly on the ground.

As they looked down at him, now a dead piece of clay, a white paper showed, peeping out from under his coat. The sheriff dismounted, pulled the papers from Danvers' pocket.

"Danvers hired Cummings to steal the letter from the post office," the sheriff said as he read Danvers' note.

"Not that letter," said Sundown. "A' letter I got this afternoon. One that damns him as a crook and skunk!"

"Well, this damns him enough," said the sheriff, as he shuffled through the papers he had taken from Danvers' pocket. He unfolded them, read them. They were the papers that Danvers had picked up in his haste in leaving the ranch; ones he'd taken from the safe.

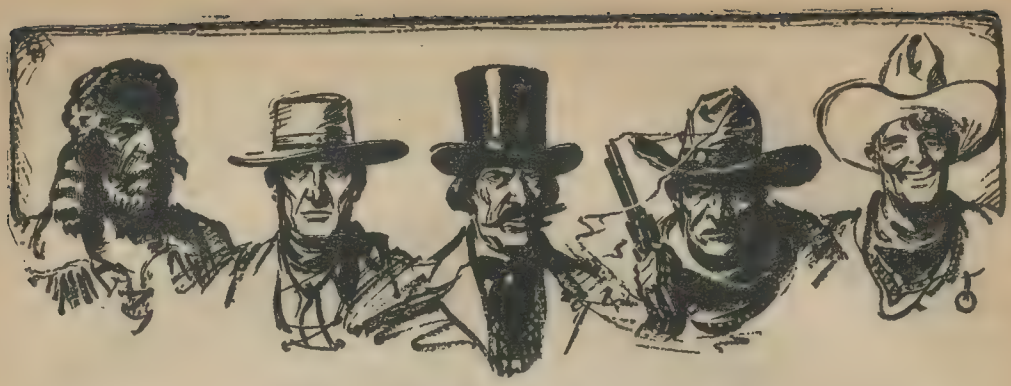
The sheriff laughed. He came over, put a hand on Slim's shoulder. "Big Bill came here to bring yuh a noose, son," he said, "but he brought yuh a Christmas present instead." The sheriff tapped a paper in his hand. "Two wills," he went on. "One made by Jim Corling in favor of Bill Danvers. An' one made by Bill Danvers in favor of Jim Corling."

Nobody got it for a moment. Sundown Slim looked blankly at the sheriff. "Why, I—"

"Ain't yore name Jim Corling?" asked the sheriff.

"Well I'll be damned!" ejaculated Sundown Slim, then he bounded up the steps toward Susan Blakely, who was standing there, framed in gold in the doorway.

"Brought *two* folks Christmas presents," said the sheriff as he watched the two close figures in the doorway.



IN THE SADDLE

MOTT EMMONS, drifter, cowman and square gambler, was broke. Broke and a stranger in the crookedest trail-town along the booming length of the old Chisholm cattle highway. He'd hit the settlement with ten dollars and lost it in ten different places—by ten different varieties of dishonesty.

Mott smiled. He sold his horse and saddle; bought a few decks of cards, an old packing case and set up his stand under a gnarled cottonwood at the end of Texas street. He nailed a sign on the tree-trunk over his packing-case layout:

THE SQUARE DEAL GAMBLING PALACE
A Low Limit but a Straight Game
Mott Emmons, Prop.

A few folks laughed at Mott's sorry-looking "palace" as much as they laughed at the idea of a square gambler in Trail City. But Mott stuck there. He had an idea that the joke wouldn't always be on him.

The fame of Mott Emmons' Square Deal was to to spread the dusty length of the cattle trails. In two years, business was booming; in three, he had the best layout in the Red River country. And business fell off in the crooked dives.

He laughed when they wanted to buy him out; sneered at an offer to align himself in partnership with the tinhorn bosses. Then, one day, he found his costly gambling house a mass of charred ruins; with the blackened body of his friend and top dealer in the smouldering wreckage—a bullet through his spine.

Mott Emmons stepped up to Clay Morris, blustering head of the old-time gambling element. Faced with accusation of arson and murder, Clay went for his guns. When the smoke cleared away, Morris was dying on the floor of the office where he had planned the fire and the killing—paying the toll of a crooked life.

Mott Emmons was framed for that shooting. Broke again, ruined; in the power of the thieving bunch he had defied, Mott spent five years in the pen before he was pardoned.

Asked if he ever regretted playing straight, when it had so bitterly brought about his ruin, Mott Emmons laughed.

"I'd do the same thing over again, every time. I gave Clay Morris a squarer deal than he ever gave any man. The square deal is the only sure-thing bet that you can't lose—if you've got enough faith to tough it out, when it seems like you're the only honest man in a world that's run

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for crooks. I'm goin' back to that town. Goin' to start the Square Deal again, under the same cottonwood tree. In five years I'll be on top of the heap again. Even money on that—want to take it?"

No one took the bet. And the passing years proved that it would have been no use betting against a sure thing, backed with that faith and courage.

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28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
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